

Life At Sea: Sores, Scabs, and Scurvy Health Measures On Board

Disease was part of life aboard ship. It was common for sailors to come on board with diseases such as chicken pox or measles; these rapidly spread to others in the tight quarters. Diseases were contracted in ports while the crew was on shore leave. Dysentary, typhus fever, and syphilis all could be traced to contact on shore. Still other ailments came from the food. Food poisoning was common, as was scurvy. Many sailors returned from a voyage suffering from malnutrition. Malaria would be contracted from mosquitoes in tropical climates. Any diseases involving vomiting and diarrhea was called the flux.

Most ships' captains did very little to assist the sick sailors; many sailors would die at sea. Doctors did travel on board, but their remedies of purging (giving something that made you vomit) and bleeding probably harmed more than they helped. Techniques like scrubbing the ships with vinegar helped control the bad smells (it really killed germs). Most sailors were left to survive on willpower and a hope to get home soon.

The shipboard health conditions were so poor that books and papers were written on the subject. Captain Cook adopted a set of health measures after many trials on his voyages. The following are measures he suggested and the ones he decided to adopt on a regular basis.

Health Measures Captain Cook Suggested

1. Personal hygiene: cold bathing, skin friction (rubbing your skin), exercise on board, clean dry clothes, hammocks, bedding, and uniforms.
2. Ship hygiene: cleanliness, ventilation, fumigation (killing fungus, mold), piped warm air and heating system.
3. Medical hygiene: spacious sick bay, segregation of contagions (people who are contagious), surgical discipline.
4. Antifever measures: prophylactic quinine (used for malaria)
5. Water: distillation, purification, sterilization
6. Food: baked wheat bread, cultivated greens, bottled fruits, salted antiscorbutic (antiscorvy) vegetables, fresh meat, salt meat.
7. Reduced spirits: wine, cider, fruit drinks in lieu (instead of)
8. Proven antiscorbutics: oranges, lemons.

Health Measures that Captain Cook Used

1. Personal hygiene: cold bathing, exercise on shore, clean dry clothes, hammocks, bedding

2. Ship hygiene: cleanliness, ventilation, fumigation
3. Galley hygiene: scoured ship's coppers (clean cooking pots)
4. Water: abundant and fresh water intake
5. Food: reduced salt meat, prohibition of meat fat; fresh meat, vegetables, sugar in lieu of oil, wheat in lieu of oatmeal
6. Empirical antiscorbutics