

Name _____



Date _____

Health Care in Colonial Times

By Sharon Fabian

You wake up feeling yucky. Your mom takes your temperature and says you have a fever and can stay home from school today. She gives you some sweet grape-flavored cold medicine. Soon you are feeling much better so you play some video games; tomorrow you'll probably go back to school.

If you are really sick, you might visit your doctor, who will also take your temperature as well as listen to your chest with his stethoscope, or you might even go to the hospital, where the latest medical equipment can diagnose and cure your illness.

Medical care today is different in so many ways from medical care in colonial times. In a few hundred years, medicine has changed from a mysterious guessing game to a modern science.

Medical "knowledge" in colonial times was based on ideas brought over from Europe. Those ideas dated back to the ancient Greeks who believed that the earth was made of four basic elements - earth, water, air, and fire. They believed that the human body was made of four "humors" or fluids, which corresponded to those four elements of the earth. The four humors of the body were blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm. Colonial physicians believed that when a person was sick, it was because the person's body did not contain the proper balance of the four humors.

To cure an illness, colonial physicians believed that the body's humors must be brought back into balance by removing the excess. They had many interesting ways of removing the excess. Some of them seem really disgusting today. Some of them were dangerous enough to kill patients.

Colonial physicians would sometimes bleed a person. They might make the sick person throw up. They might put hot poultices on a sick person, causing blisters to fester. They might give medicines containing mercury (a poison). Also, and always a favorite, they might apply live leeches to the skin.

Fortunately, people in colonial times didn't go to a doctor very often. In fact, only the wealthier people saw a doctor at all. Many people never saw a doctor when they were sick.

As a matter of fact, there was little that a physician could do to cure diseases at that time. Contagious diseases such as smallpox, malaria, and influenza were greatly feared in colonial times because they could not be cured.

Sick people were often cared for only at home. Often, the mother in the family provided what medical care she could. Women often grew medicinal herbs in their garden. They kept herbs and other remedies available to use whenever needed. They provided nursing care to help their "patients" feel as good as possible until they got well again. Caring for the sick was a skill passed down from mothers to daughters.

When people did decide to seek medical care, they would go to the local apothecary. An apothecary was a combination drug store and doctor's office. Here they could buy herbal medicines or even a jar of live leeches, no prescription necessary, and they could even arrange for the physician to make a house call if they had the money.

As strange as it sounds, colonial barbers were also involved in medical care. In fact, the jobs of barber and surgeon seemed to be somewhat interchangeable in colonial times. If an emergency required a body part to be amputated, or if a tooth needed to be pulled, the barber might have been just the person to see.

It all seems very strange now, but that was medical care in colonial America.

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Questions

- _____ 1. Colonial medical care was based on the ideas of _____.
 - A. Benjamin Franklin
 - B. Ancient Greeks
 - C. British doctors
 - D. Medical colleges in Europe

- _____ 2. To buy medicine, colonists would go to the _____.
 - A. apothecary
 - B. grocery store
 - C. drug store
 - D. barber

- _____ 3. A _____ might be called on to pull out an infected tooth.
 - A. blacksmith
 - B. carpenter
 - C. barber
 - D. soldier

- _____ 4. Medical care in colonial times was _____ than it is now.
 - A. more regulated
 - B. more scientific
 - C. more expensive
 - D. less scientific

- _____ 5. The word *humors* meant _____ in the body.
 - A. germs
 - B. funny bones
 - C. fluids
 - D. blood vessels

- _____ 6. According to information in this article, women often grew herbs to _____.
 - A. flavor salads
 - B. make the house smell good
 - C. treat sick people
 - D. none of the above

- _____ 7. Live leeches were used to treat sick patients.
 - A. false
 - B. true

- _____ 8. One of the four "humors" was _____.
 - A. fire
 - B. earth
 - C. water
 - D. phlegm

