

Life at Sea: Sores, Scabs and Scurvy

Health Measures on Board

Disease was part of life aboard a ship. It was common for sailors to come on board with diseases such as chicken pox or measles and these would rapidly spread to others in the tight quarters. Diseases were contracted in ports while the crew was on shore leave. Dysentery, 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 disease 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 bed 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 contagious (people who are contagious), surgical discipline.
4. Anti-fever measures: prophylactic quinine (used for malaria).
5. Water: distillation, purification and sterilization.
6. Food: baked wheat bread, cultivated greens, bottled fruits, salted antiscorbutic (anti-scurvy) vegetables, fresh meat and salted meat.
7. Reduced spirits: wine, cider, fruit drinks instead of.
8. Proven antiscorbutics: oranges and lemons.

Health Measures Captain Cook Used

1. Personal hygiene: cold bathing, exercise on shore, clean dry clothes, hammocks, bedding.
2. Ship hygiene: cleanliness, ventilation and fumigation.
3. Galley hygiene: scoured the 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 instead of oil, and wheat instead of oatmeal.
6. Empirical antiscorbutics.