

Sickness & Health

What happened the last time you were ill? Probably someone took your temperature and gave you medicine bought from the supermarket. If you were more seriously ill, maybe you made an appointment to see the doctor. Perhaps the doctor gave you a prescription for special drugs from the chemist. You were probably tucked up cosily in a clean, warm bed until you felt better. Five hundred years ago, you would not have been so lucky.



What kind of illnesses did people get?

People probably had many of the same illnesses then as we do now. They suffered from colds, mumps and measles just like us. But because people didn't understand how diseases spread and how the body works, people used to die from illnesses like the flu, which we can easily cure now. Some serious diseases have nowadays disappeared from Scotland altogether. Five hundred years ago lots of people suffered from smallpox and malaria in this country.

People generally ate only the food that they could grow themselves and it was not always possible for people to eat a balanced diet. This made it more difficult to fight off illness. In some years when the harvest was bad, there was famine in Scotland and then people died of starvation.



It was tough to be a baby in those days. Many children died as babies and many more before they were ten. Only about one person out of every four people born lived until they were middle aged! Because of poor health, people then were generally shorter than they are today. The average man was about 1.7m tall and the average woman 1.6 m, probably about your height.

What was the plague?

In the years 1347 –1350 a terrible disease swept across Europe. It killed more than a third of all the people. It was known as the Black Death and it was spread by rats. It arrived in Scotland in 1349. People who lived in areas with the plague were sometimes not allowed to travel, but once the plague got into towns, it was hard to stop it spreading.

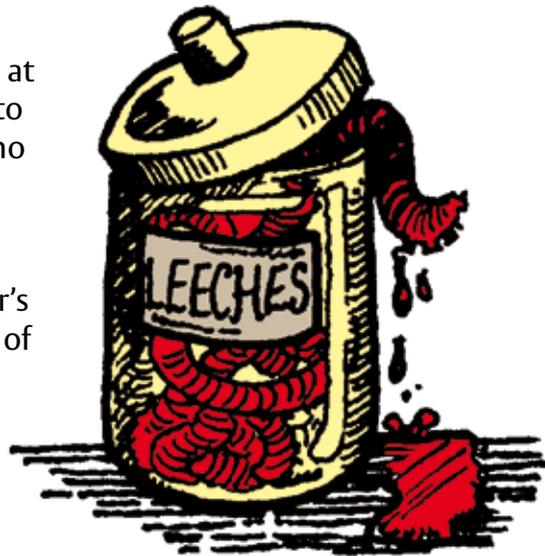
Other illnesses spread more easily because there were no supplies of fresh water, nor good systems for draining sewage or dirty water.



Were there any doctors?

Five hundred years ago there were very few professional doctors at all. Many people knew themselves which plants were supposed to heal which illnesses. In many places there were 'wise women' who traditionally knew about cures. They were sometimes known as 'skilly wives'.

Have you ever seen a red and white striped pole outside a barber's shop? As well as cutting hair, barbers in the old days were a kind of doctor. The red and white stripes stand for red blood and white bandages. Barbers often pulled out teeth and 'let blood' from people. People believed that if you were ill, it was healthy to have some of the 'ill' blood in your body taken out. Sometimes the barbers used blood-sucking leeches to take the blood!



If you were unlucky enough to need an operation, there was no anaesthetic and even fewer trained surgeons. You would be awake all through the operation and might be tied down to keep you still! Patients who survived operations often died because of infection from dirty tools soon after.

What kind of medicine was there?

Most people would either take herbal medicines that everyone knew about, or they might go to a herbal expert, often a woman who would give them herbal medicine to take. Herbs and plants were used for making ointments and plasters as well as medicines. They were taken for serious illnesses like cancer as well as minor problems such as bleeding noses, baldness, sunburn or dog bites. An illness called rickets, which we know today is caused by a bad diet, was treated by drinking a snail and its shell dissolved in vinegar!

People also believed that drinking or bathing in water from wells at particular places would help cure illness. After taking the waters, people left a gift, often a pin, a coin or a strip of rag tied to a nearby tree. It was believed that the rag would hold all the illness of the person, which could then be left at the well. Sometimes people carried crystals which they believed would keep illness away. Other people believed that making a journey to a holy place would help them. They travelled, often by foot to places connected with saints, like St Andrews or Whithorn.

