



Unusual Medical Practices Through the Ages

Weird History Handout Series – Vol. 4

Medicine has always been a mix of science, trial and error, and cultural beliefs. While modern medicine is evidence-based, history is full of strange cures, dangerous treatments, and surprising innovations. This handout explores unusual medical practices from antiquity to the 19th century, showing how far we've come — and how human creativity has always shaped healing.

I. Antiquity

Trepanation

One of the oldest surgical practices, trepanation involved drilling holes in the skull to release “evil spirits” or relieve pressure. Skulls from as early as 7,000 years ago show signs of healing, suggesting some patients survived.

Honey as Medicine

Ancient Egyptians used honey as an antiseptic, applying it to wounds and burns. Modern science confirms honey's antibacterial properties, proving that some ancient remedies worked remarkably well.

Bloodletting with Leeches

Though popular for centuries, this treatment dates back to ancient Greece. Physicians believed balancing “humors” could cure illness, so blood was drained to restore harmony. Leeches were often the tool of choice.

Garlic for Heart Health

Egyptian papyri describe garlic as a treatment for heart problems. It was used to boost stamina and vitality, a precursor to today's recognition of garlic's cardiovascular benefits.

II. Middle Ages

Powdered Mummy Medicine

European physicians prescribed ground mummy flesh mixed with wine for everything from headaches to internal bleeding. This gruesome trend lasted into the 17th century and reflected a fascination with “mystical” Eastern remedies.

Astrology-Based Medicine

Doctors often consulted star charts to decide when to treat patients or perform surgeries. Astrology was intertwined with medicine, influencing diagnoses and recovery predictions.

Urine Analysis for Diagnosis

Medieval physicians believed urine color, smell, and taste revealed a patient's health. Illustrated urine charts guided diagnoses, turning a simple test into a key diagnostic tool.

Toad Amulets for Plague Protection

People carried dried toads or toad bones in amulets, believing they absorbed poison or prevented disease. These charms reflected a desperate search for protection during epidemics.

III. 19th Century

Arsenic “Health” Products

Arsenic wafers, soaps, and tonics promised a pale complexion and improved health. These products were popular among Victorian women, despite arsenic’s deadly toxicity.

Radium Water and Glow-in-the-Dark Medicine

Radium was once marketed as a health booster. People drank radium-infused water and used radium-based ointments, unaware of its dangers. This fad ended in tragedy, inspiring strict radiation safety standards.

Electric Shock Therapy for Everything

In the late 19th century, electric currents were used to treat depression, hysteria, and even impotence. Some machines resembled torture devices, but they paved the way for modern electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

Cocaine as a Miracle Drug

Cocaine was widely used in 19th-century medicine as a painkiller and “energizer.” It appeared in tonics, cough syrups, and even Coca-Cola. Doctors only recognized its addictive nature decades later.