

Medical Terminology For Genealogists

Medical terminology can be very frustrating for the average person. Libraries usually have medical dictionaries/encyclopedias which will assist patrons in finding the definitions. Terminology like technology has changed over the decades. Most contemporary medical dictionaries will be of little use to the genealogist trying to interpret old diaries, letters, pension records, or death records.

One must remember that until the early 1900's, our life expectancy was only 42 years of age. The infant mortality rate was extremely high for all ethnic groups. Only 66% of the children who survived the birth process would live to adulthood. In some areas of the country, the figure was less than 50%. The mortality rate among women during the delivery process was also high.

The following glossary of early medical terms includes many of the most common ailments that our ancestors faced. A definition of these ailments may give the family historian a glance into the physical trials suffered by the family. This may assist the genealogist in discovering a pattern to a disease afflicting generations. For further information consult the bibliography which follows the glossary.

Ague: high fever related to malaria or severe reoccurring symptoms.

Air-Swellings: tympanites; air or gas in the intestines.

Albuminuria: see **Bright's Disease of the Kidneys.**

Anasarca: generalized massive edema.

Anchylosis: stiff joints.

Anidrosis: too little perspiration.

Anthrax: a carbuncle or boil which is larger and more painful than a normal boil.

Apoplexy: paralysis or cerebral vascular accident or stroke.

Appendicitis: see **Cholera Morbus.**

Arachnitis: inflammation of the arachnoid and pia mater which are membranes located in the brain.

Ascites: dropsy of the belly; a collection of water in the stomach.

Asphyxia or Asphixia: cyanotic and lack of oxygen.

Atrophy: wasting away or diminishing in size.

Barber's Itch: ring-worm of the beard.

Bilious Colic: tortuous pain in the belly.

Bilious Fever: typhoid, malaria, hepatitis or elevated temperature and bile emesis.

Black Death: bubonic plague.

Black Fever: acute infection with high temperature and dark red skin lesions.

Blackwater Fever: dark urine associated with gravely high fever.

Bloody-Flux or Dysentery: inflammation of the large bowels, bloody stools; commonly known as Colitis.

Blue Disease: a blue tinge over the whole body; commonly known as Cyanosis; body warmth is reduced, causing severe complications in ability to breath, usually results in death.

Brain Fever: meningitis.

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Bright's Disease of the Kidneys: albumen in the urine caused by chronic inflammation of the kidneys, technically known as **Albuminuria**.

Bronchorrhea: a bronchial flu; known today as bronchitis.

Bronze John: see **Yellow fever**.

Brown Tail Rash: an irritating, itching rash on the skin caused by small shed hairs of the gypsy moth (or its caterpillar) carried by the wind and lodging in the pores of human skin.

Calenture: related to **Yellow Fever**; a disease which caused severe high fever and blood-filled vomiting.

Canine Madness: rabies, normally caused by a human being bitten by an animal.

Canker: ulceration of mouth or lips or herpes simplex.

Catarrhal: nose and throat discharge from cold or allergy.

Cerebritis: inflammation of cerebrum or lead poisoning.

Chilbains: a painful sore or swelling on the foot or hand caused by exposure to severe cold conditions.

Child-Bed Fever: puerperal fever; septicaemia; blood poisoning during pregnancy.

Chin Cough: whooping cough.

Chlorosis: see **Green Sickness**.

Cholera: acute severe contagious diarrhea with intestinal lining sloughing.

Cholera Morbus: characterized by nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and elevated temperature. Was also called **Appendicitis**.

Clap: gonorrhea.

Colic: any type of abdominal pain or cramping.

Colitis: see **Bloody-Flux** or **Dysentery**.

Congestion: any collection of fluid in an organ, like your lungs.

Congestion Chills: malaria with diarrhea.

Consumption: tuberculosis of the lungs.

Costiveness: constipation.

Crusted Tetter: impetigo.

Cyanosis: dark skin color associated with lack of oxygen in blood. Also known as **Blue Disease**.

Debility: lack of movement or ability to get out of bed for any length of time.

Devonshire Colic: see **Painter's Colic**.

Distemper, Throat: diphtheria or scarlet fever. Symptoms included malaise, discharge from nose and throat, anorexia.

Dropsy: anasarca or edema: a collection of water in a large cavity.

Dropsy of the Brain: chronic hydrocephalus; an abnormal increase of fluid in the brain.

Dry Belly-Ache: see **Painter's Colic**.

Dysentery: inflammation of colon with frequent passage of mucous and blood.

Dyspepsia: indigestion and heartburn. Frequently will display symptoms of a heart attack.

Egyptian Chlorosis: hookworm.

Epidemic: the rapid spread of any contagious disease among many people.

Erysipelas: contagious skin disease, due to Streptococci with vesicular and bulbous lesions.

False Measles: see **Rose Rash**.

Fits: sudden attack (convulsions) or seizure of muscle activity.

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Flatulent Colic: see **Wind Colic**.

Flux: any type of intestinal disorder, such as diarrhea or dysentery, characterized by an excessive flow or discharge of fluid, like hemorrhage.

French Pox: syphilis.

Great Pox: syphilis.

Green Sickness: also known as **Chlorosis**; a green tinge to the skin of a young girl going through the puberty stage.

Grip: influenza like symptoms.

Heat Stroke: body temperature elevates because of surrounding environmental temperature . Body does not perspire to reduce temperature. Coma and death soon occur if condition is not reversed.

Hypertrophic: enlargement of organ, usually associated with the heart.

Hydrocephalus: also known as **Water On The Brain**--enlarged head.

Hydrophobia: rabies.

Idrosis: greatly increased perspiration.

Inanition: physical condition resulting from lack of food.

Indican in the Urine: poisonous material being thrown back into the system.

Infantile Debility: see **Marasmus**.

Infantile Spinal Paralysis: polio.

Interalgia: see **Wind Colic**.

King's Evil: scrofula, or swelling of the neck glands; tuberculosis of the lymphatic glands.

La Grippe: a form of influenza.

Lead Palsy: a sequel to **Painter's Colic**; muscles of the forearm are palsied from lead in the body; also known in contemporary terms as "lead poisoning".

Lockjaw: tetanus or infectious disease affecting the muscles of the neck and jaw. If untreated, the condition is fatal within 8 days.

Long Sickness: tuberculosis.

Lues Disease: syphilis.

Lumbago: rheumatic pain in the back.

Lung Fever: pneumonia.

Lying In: time of the delivery of an infant.

Malignant Sore Throat: diphtheria.

Marasmus: infantile debility; condition where the child is completely unable to absorb any nutritional content from food.

Membranous Croup: diphtheria.

Metritis: inflammation of uterus or purulent vaginal discharge.

Milk Crust: small red, itchy pimples on the face or scalp of infants or children which eventually burst and exclude a sticky fluid forming a yellow crust.

Milk Fever: disease caused by drinking contaminated milk, like undulant fever or brucellosis.

Milk Leg: phlebitis or inflammation in the leg beginning two to seven weeks after giving birth.

Milk Sickness: also known as the **Trembles**; a disease contracted by eating a plant which grows in level, heavily-timbered, wet oak-land (mainly in the Western States), or by eating meat wherein the animal has grazed upon such plants; Symptoms would include: nausea, vomiting, general

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debility, severe bad breath.

Mortification: gangrene or necrotic tissue, a dead body which has decomposed to the degree of being a black stinking mass..

Mother's Marks: dilation of minute blood-vessels, varying in size, the smallest being the "spider mark".

Nervous Prostration: extreme exhaustion from inability to control physical and mental activities.

Neuralgia: describe any discomfort, such as a headache (for example) was described by this term.

Osmidrosis: perspiration with a peculiar smell.

Painter's Colic: also known as **Devonshire Colic** or **Dry-Belly Ache**; a form of colic experienced with slow lead poisoning.

Palsy: paralysis to a part of the body.

Pellagra: a disease caused by eating spoiled maize (corn) but could also include any type of food; Symptoms would include vomiting, diarrhea, followed by a swollen and sore tongue, and a red, ulcerated mouth, rashes throughout the body, and body sores.

Pessary: a device worn in the vagina for birth control or to give support to a displaced uterus.

Phisic: medicine.

Phthisis: chronic wasting away , or another name for tuberculosis.

Phlebitis: tenderness or hardness of an infected vein; treatment with leeches and lotion.

Piles: hemorrhoids.

Plague: any widespread acute febrile highly infectious disease with a high fatality rate.

Pleurisy: inflammation and mucus in the lungs.

Pox: syphilis.

Puerperal Fever: elevated temperature after giving birth to an infant.

Purple Disease: pupura hemorrhagica; a rash of spots on the body (like freckles but different color), small, round, and bright red, which changes to a purple color or dark-red spots in irregular livid patches.

Putrid Fever: see **Typhus Fever**.

Pyemia: a form of blood poisoning from pus in the blood carried to various parts of the body.

Quinsy: an abcess of and around a tonsil.

Rheumatism: any disorder associated with pain in joints.

Rose-Rash: "false measles" or roseola.

Saint Vitus's Dance: chorea; nervous disorder which creates involuntary muscular contradictions.

Scarlet Fever: disease marked by bright red rash, high fever, and sore throat. Was highly contagious.

Sciatica: painful condition in the hip or thigh.

Scrofula: tuberculosis of neck lymph glands. Progresses slowly with abcesses and fistulas developing. Usually associated with younger people. See also **King's Evil**.

Scurvy: lack of Vitamin C. Symptoms of weakness, spongy gums and hemorrhages under the skin.

Self-Pollution: masturbation.

Ship Fever: see **Typhus Fever**.

Softening of Brain: result of a stroke or hemorrhage in brain, with the end result of tissue

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softing in that area.

Sore Throat Distemper: diphtheria or quinsy.

Spasms: sudden involuntary contraction of muscle or group of muscles, like a convulsion.

Spotted Fever: Cerebro-Spinal Meningitis.

St. Anthony's Fire: erysipelas; infectious disease with inflammation of the skin and fever.

St. Vitus Dance: ceaseless occurrence of rapid complex jerking movements performed involuntarily.

Summer Complaint Of Infants: cholera in infants.

Sunstroke: uncontrolled elevation of body temperature due to environmental heat. Lack of sodium in body a predisposing cause.

Swamp Sickness: could be malaria, typhoid, or encephalitis.

Tick Fever: another name for Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.

Trench Mouth: painful ulcers found along the gum line, caused by poor nutrition and hygiene.

Typhoid Fever: fever caused by bacteria in bad water and food and marked by reddish spots on the skin and severe inflammation of the intestines.

Typus Fever: also known as Putrid Fever or Ship Fever; contagious disease transmitted to man by the bite of fleas, lice, etc.

Uremia: blood in the urine.

Water-Brash: pyrosis; similar to heartburn; belching of a thin, watery fluid.

White Swelling: tuberculosis of the bones.

Wind Colic: also known as Interalgia or Flatulent Colic; distressing pain in the bowel regions.

Winter Fever: pneumonia.

Womb Fever: infection of the uterus.

Wool Starter's Disease: see Anthrax.

Worm Fever: convulsions associated with teething, worms.

Yellow Jack or Yellow Fever: also known as Bronze John; infectious tropical disease transmitted by a yellow fever mosquito.

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