



## Historical and Obsolete Medical Terms

*As genealogists examine old journals and certificates and listen to elderly citizens recounting oral history, they encounter many medical terms no longer in common use. This list is intended to be a guide that may help you analyse terminology found in old death certificates, newspaper articles, memorials, obituaries, military papers and accounts.*

### A

Addison's Disease	A disease of the kidneys; causes low blood pressure, weakness and a bronze discolouration of the skin
Ague	See <i>Malaria</i>
Ague Cake	A hard tumour or swelling on the left side of the abdomen, caused by malaria
Air-Swelling	Tympanites; air or gas in the intestines
Alpine Madness	Hydrophobia
American Plague	Yellow fever
Anchylosis	Stiff joint
Anidrosis	Too little perspiration
Anthrax	Bacterial infection affecting the skin (cutaneous), lungs, (inhalation) or stomach (gastro-intestinal). Skin anthrax (also called Wool-Sorter's disease) is the most common form and results in the formation of a large, painful carbuncle or boil.
Apoplexy	Sudden paralysis caused by stroke
Arashnitis	Inflammation of the arachnoid and plamater, which are membranes of the brain
Ascites	Dropsy of the belly; a build-up of fluid in the abdomen.

### B

Bacteremia	Blood poisoning
Barber's Itch	Ringworm of the beard
Bilious Colic	Tortuous pain in the belly
Bilious Fever	Chronic malaria
Black Water Fever	Malaria
Bloody Flux	Dysentery; inflammation of the large bowel causing blood in the stool
Boil	An abscess of the skin or hair follicle; also called furuncle



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Bright's Disease	Albumen in the urine, technically known as albuminuria; nephritis; kidney disease
Bronchorrhea	A bronchial flu
Brown Tail Rash	An irritating, itching rash on the skin caused by small shedded hairs of the gypsy moth (or its caterpillar) carried by the wind and lodging in the pores of the skin
Blue Disease	A blue tinge over the whole body, commonly known as cyanosis; body warmth is reduced, hampering breathing; usually fatal
Brain Fever	Intense headache; fever, vertigo, intolerance to light or sound; see <i>Meningitis</i>
Bronze John	See <i>Yellow Fever</i>

## C

Camp Fever	See <i>Typhus</i>
Catarrh	Inflammation of the mucus membranes in the sinuses, head and throat
Cerebro-Spinal Fever	See <i>Meningitis</i>
Chilblains	Painful swelling on foot or hand cause by exposure to cold
Childbed Fever	A form of septicaemia caused by poor hygiene during delivery; blood poisoning during pregnancy
Chin Cough	See <i>Whooping Cough</i>
Cholera	An infectious bacterial disease; causes severe diarrhea and dehydration and can lead to death if untreated.
Chorea	Nervous disorder that creates involuntary muscle contractions; also called St Vitus' Dance
Clap	Gonorrhea
Congestive Fever	See <i>Malaria</i>
Consumption	Tuberculosis
Corruption	Infection
Costiveness	Constipation
Cramp Colic	Appendicitis
Creeping Paralysis	Multiple Sclerosis
Croup	Respiratory infection, mainly in children, resulting in coughing and difficulty breathing
Crusted Tetter	impetigo



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## D

Debility	Weakness, lack of strength
Derbyshire Neck	See <i>Goitre</i>
Devonshire Colic	See <i>Painter's Colic</i>
Diphtheria	Bacterial infection that can lead to difficulty breathing, heart failure, paralysis and death
Dropsy	Edema; swelling caused by the accumulation of excess fluid ; caused by kidney or heart disease
Dropsy of the Brain	Chronic hydrocephalus; an abnormal increase of fluid in the brain
Dry Bellyache	See <i>Painter's Colic</i>
Dysentery	Intestinal inflammation, especially of the colon, leading to cramps and severe diarrhea.

## E

Egyptian Chlorosis	Hookworm
Enteric Fever	See <i>Typhoid Fever</i>
Erysipelas	Infectious disease of the skin with fever and intense rash; also called St Anthony's Fire

## F

Falling Sickness	Epilepsy
False Measles	See <i>Rose Rash</i>
Felon	Infection of end of finger; infected hangnail
Flatulent Colic	See <i>Wind Colic</i>
Fits	Convulsions
Flux of humour	Circulation
French Pox	Venereal disease
Furuncle	See <i>Boil</i>



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## G

Galloping Consumption	Rapid progressive tuberculosis
Gleet	See <i>Catarrh</i>
Goitre	Enlargement of the thyroid gland caused by lack of iodine; also called Derbyshire Neck
Green Sickness	Chlorosis; a tinge of green to the skin of a young girl in puberty; also anemia
Grippe	Influenza, also La Grippe

## H

Hallucinations	Delirium
Hectic Fever	Recurring fever of non-specific cause
Hepatic Melancholy	Cirrhosis of the liver
Hives	Acute allergic reactions resulting in skin rash
Hospital Fever	See <i>Typhus</i>
Hydrophobia	Abnormal fear of water; inability to swallow water; rabies

## I - J - K

Indican in the urine	Poisonous material being thrown back into the system
Idrosis	Greatly increased perspiration
Infantile Debility	See <i>Marasmus</i>
Jail Fever	See <i>Typhus</i>
King's Evil	Tuberculosis of the lymphatic glands; also called Scrofula

## L

La Grippe	Influenza
Lead Palsy	A sequel to Painter's Colic; muscles of the forearm are palsied from lead in the body
Lockjaw	See <i>Tetanus</i>



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Long Sickness	Tuberculosis
Lung Fever	Pneumonia
Lung Sickness	Tuberculosis

## M

Mania	madness
Malaria	Serious disease caused by mosquito bites; symptoms include fever, chills, headache, sweats. Also called Ague, Remitting Fever
Malignant Sore Throat	See <i>Diphtheria</i>
Marasmus	Infantile debility; malnutrition
Melancholia	Depression, low spirits
Meningitis	Inflammation of the membranes on the surface of the brain; also called brain fever, cerebrospinal fever.
Miasma	“bad air” or bad smells; once believed to cause disease
Milk Crust	Small, red, itchy pimples on the face or scalp of infants or children which burst and exude a sticky fluid forming a yellow crust
Milk Fever	A result of infection of the breasts after childbirth
Milk Leg	Phlebitis or inflammation in the leg, occurring shortly after childbirth
Milk Sickness	Also called Trembles. Illness brought about from drinking milk taken from cows who have ingested the poisonous white snakeroot plant (it is interesting to note that Abraham Lincoln’s natural mother died of this)
Mortification	Infection; gangrene or necrosis
Mother’s Marks	Dilation of minute blood vessels, varying in size, the smallest being the “spider mark”

## N - O

Natural Decay	See <i>Senile Decay</i>
Nervous Fever	Typhus fever, also known as slow fever, hospital fever, sail fever, ship fever, putrid fever, malignant fever, jail fever
Osmidrosis	Perspiration with a peculiar smell



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### P

Painter's Colic	Also known as Devonshire Colic or Dry Bellyache; a form of colic experienced with slow lead poisoning
Palsy	Paralysis of a body part
Paristhmitis	An abscess in the throat near the tonsils, also called Quinsy
Paroxysm	Convulsions or spasms
Pellagra	A disease caused by eating spoiled maize; symptoms begin with vomiting and diarrhea, followed by a swollen and sore tongue, and a red, ulcerated mouth, rash on the body and body sores
Pessary	A device worn in the vagina for birth control or to give support to a displaced uterus
Phisic	A purging medicine
Phlebitis	Tenderness or hardness of an infected vein; treatment with leeches or lotions
Phthisis	Tuberculosis
Piles	Hemorrhoids
Pink Disease	Mercury poisoning in children, caused by high levels of mercury in teething powders
Pink Eye	Conjunctivitis
Pleurisy	Inflammation and mucus in the lungs
Pox	Syphilis
Puerperal Fever	See <i>Childbed Fever</i>
Purple Disease	Pupura hemorrhagica; a rash of small, round, bright red spots on the body, which change to dark red or purple in irregular patches
Putrid Fever	See <i>Typhus</i>
Pyemia	A form of blood poisoning from pus in the blood carried to various parts of the body

### Q - R

Quinsy	See <i>Paristhmitis</i>
Remitting Fever	See <i>Malaria</i>
Rheumatism	Inflammation of the joints
Rose Rash	Roseola, "false measles"



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### S

St Anthony's Fire	See <i>Erysipelas</i>
St Vitus' Dance	See <i>Chorea</i>
Sanguinous Crest	Scab
Scarlatina	Scarlet Fever
Sciatica	Painful condition of hip and/or thigh
Scrofula	See <i>King's Evil</i>
Scurvy	Disease caused by lack of Vitamin C; common among sailors on long voyages and characterized by general weakness, bone pain, gum disease and bleeding from the skin.
Senile Decay	Death caused by old age; also called Natural Decay
Ship fever	See <i>Typhus</i>
Seven Year Itch	Scabies
Sleeping Sickness	Encephalitis
Smallpox	A serious infectious disease, causing fever, vomiting, mouth sores and skin rash. Often fatal and survivors were often left with blindness and/or severe scarring.
Softening of the Brain	Mental deterioration, senility
Sore Throat Distemper	See <i>Quinsy</i>
Spotted Fever	Cerebro-spinal meningitis or typhus
Strangery	Rupture or stricture
Stroke	Rupture of blood vessels in the brain
Summer Complaint	Gastrointestinal infection, esp. in children, causing severe diarrhea; caused by food contamination and poor hygiene.

### T

Tetanus	Bacterial disease causing fever, muscle spasms and stiffness, and difficulty swallowing.
Throat Ailment	See <i>Diphtheria</i>
Trench Fever	Transmitted by body lice; causes fever, rash, weakness, severe back and leg pain. First identified in WW I soldiers.
Tuberculosis	Infectious disease affecting mainly the lungs (pulmonary tuberculosis) causing coughing, chest pain, fatigue, fever. Also



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	called Consumption, Phthisis, Long Sickness and Lung Sickness. Can also affect other parts of the body – see <i>King's Evil</i>
Typhoid Fever	An infectious bacterial disease, causing fever, weakness, rash and confusion; a type of Enteric Fever.
Typhus	Contagious disease transmitted to humans by the bite of fleas or body lice. Also called Hospital Fever, Jail Fever, War Fever.

## U - V

Uremia	Blood in the urine
Vapors	Fainting
Variola	See <i>Smallpox</i>

## W - Z

War Fever or War Plague	19 <sup>th</sup> C term for cerebro-spinal meningitis; typhus
Water Brash	Pyrosis; similar to heartburn; belching of a thin, watery fluid
Whitlow	Boil
Whooping Cough	Respiratory tract infection marked by a severe cough; also called Chin Cough
Wind Colic	Distressing pain in the bowels; also known as interalgia or flatulent colic
Winter Fever	Pneumonia
Wool-Sorter's Disease	See <i>Anthrax</i>
Yellow Jack or Yellow Fever	Infection tropical disease transmitted by mosquitos; also known as Bronze John





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