



Common illnesses on the *SS Great Britain*

With around 700 passengers and crew on a voyage to Australia, illness was part of life onboard the *SS Great Britain*. Illnesses on board included:

- Tuberculosis (known as consumption)
- Measles
- Pneumonia
- Smallpox
- Typhoid
- Cholera



These illnesses were widespread and sometimes fatal in the Victorian era but due to advances in medicine most are now rare and treatable.

The most common illness on the *SS Great Britain* was, of course, seasickness!

Cholera

Cholera is an infectious bacterial disease which is caused by eating contaminated food or water. It can last for several days and can be fatal if left untreated. Outbreaks of the disease were common in the Victorian Britain. In the 21st century cholera, is only found in places where people sadly don't have access to clean drinking water or good sanitation.

Symptoms: diarrhoea; vomiting; muscle cramps; and dehydration

Measles

Measles is a highly contagious disease caused by a virus which spreads easily through coughs and sneezes; it can be fatal. Measles was common in the 1800s and we have several passenger diaries which mention cases of measles on board the *SS Great Britain*. In the late 1960s a vaccine was introduced for the measles, almost eradicating the disease.

Symptoms: fever; a runny nose; inflamed eyes; white spots inside the mouth; and a red rash usually starting on the face and spreading to the rest of the body.

Pneumonia

Pneumonia is an infection in the lungs that causes difficulty breathing. It was one of the main causes of death in the Victorian era. Advances in medicine mean that pneumonia can now be treated with antibiotics.

Symptoms: cough; difficulty breathing; a high temperature; and chest pain.

Seasickness

Seasickness was the most common illness on board the *SS Great Britain*. A form of motion sickness, like travel sickness it is caused by the rocking motion of the ship. Even in the 21st century there is no set cure, but like the Victorian passengers found, symptoms tend to go away as people get used to the motion of the ship.

Symptoms: nausea; vomiting; cold sweats; headache; sleepiness; and loss of appetite

Smallpox

Smallpox is an extremely infectious disease caused by the *variola* virus. The virus is transmitted from person to person during close contact with infected people. Edward Jenner created a vaccine for smallpox at the end of the 18th century, by 1853 the vaccine was compulsory; the *SS Great Britain* even carried some vaccines in case of an outbreak. The disease has now been wiped out around the world.

Symptoms: fever; vomiting; sores in the mouth; and a rash which turns to fluid filled bumps that scab over and fall off leaving scars.



Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis is a contagious bacterial infection which destroys the lungs. Caused by a bacterium this airborne infection is spread through coughs and sneezes and develops slowly. It was known by many different names including Consumption, Phthisis and TB. In the 19th century up to 25% of deaths in Europe were caused by tuberculosis and it was the most common recorded cause of death on the *SS Great Britain*. Very few patients with tuberculosis ever recovered in Victorian times but due to the discovery of antibiotics in the 20th century tuberculosis is no longer fatal.

Symptoms: continual cough causing difficulty breathing; coughing up blood and mucus; lack of appetite and weight loss; fever; night sweats; and extreme tiredness.

Typhoid

Typhoid is a highly infectious disease caused by a bacterium similar to one that causes food poisoning. It is spread by contact with contaminated faeces (poo). Poor sanitation and lack of access to clean drinking water made it a common disease in the Victorian era. Typhoid, like cholera, is now only found in places where people sadly don't have access to clean drinking water or good sanitation.

Symptoms: high temperature; headache; aches and pains; cough and constipation

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Why not try the Ship's Surgeons Quiz and see how good you would be at diagnosing sick passengers and crew!

Discover more about sickness on board the *SS Great Britain* by using Global Stories

https://globalstories.ssgreatbritain.org/_/events/sickness-and-disease/

