

The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793

The Yellow Fever **epidemic** of 1793 was a gruesome and horrible disease. It took over 5,000 lives from August 1 to November 9. This shocking statistic reveals that it is one of the most deadly epidemics in U.S. history. To this day there is no cure for Yellow Fever, because it's a viral disease, you can only prevent it from starting up. Yellow Fever has many disturbing symptoms and effects. And the people of 1793 Philadelphia tried many things to stop the disease, to no avail. And another reason it was so deadly is the way it was caused and how easily it spread.

Symptoms and Effects

There are four stages to the deadly disease, Yellow Fever. Each with their own effects and symptoms. The first stage lasts for about three days. The symptoms of the first stage are chills, headache, aching in the back and limbs, violent seizures, and then an extremely high fever would develop along with constipation. And in the words of Doctor Benjamin Rush about 1793 Philadelphia, "an unusual number of bilious fevers, accompanied with symptoms of uncommon malignity. All was not right in our city." Then came the second stage. This is what made Yellow Fever spread like a wild fire. The victim for a few hours, would feel good as new. So naturally you would interact with other people. Yet the disease was still there, lurking inside of you. Then the third stage of Yellow Fever came along. And with it came a high fever. Next your eyes and skin would turn a sickly yellow, giving it the name, Yellow Fever. High fever and yellow skin coloration was just the beginning of the third stage. The worst thing happened in the inside of your body. Your red blood cells start to deteriorate. Bile builds up in your body. Your nose, intestines, and gums started to bleed. Furthermore you would vomit stale, black, blood. Red dots called petechia would erupt on your face and chest from vomiting so much. Last, but certainly not least came the fourth stage of Yellow Fever. The victim's pulse weakens, their tongue turns brown. Sometimes the victims would have liver and kidney failure. You may have thought Yellow Fever

just effected your body, but surprise surprise it gets worse. It also effects your mental state. You would become depressed, confused, and delirious. Yellow Fever is starting to sound like something out of a horror movie.

What Did the People of Philadelphia Do to Stop Yellow Fever?

One reason the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 took so many lives is because the people and the government reacted far too late. In the first week of the epidemic eight people were recorded to have died of Yellow Fever, but nobody cared or was worried of what was to come. By the time people tried to stop it or find a cure Yellow Fever was already raging uncontrollably. And the things the people tried to stop or cure it were, in my opinion, ridiculous.

So at the time trash cans, indoor plumbing, and landfills did not exist in the towns. So where did all the people put their trash you may ask. Well, as disgusting as it may sound, the answer is they would dump it out the window into the streets and other public areas. So that means trash, animal carcasses, and even human waste piling up and lining the streets. Nobody could escape encountering the waste on a daily basis. So once the epidemic came many doctors blamed the disease on trash in the streets. In 1793 believe it or not, their explanation for disease was a 2500 year old theory, from ancient Greece that disease was caused by unbalanced **humors**. Humors are body liquids like blood, phlegm, choler bile, or saliva. So that theory suggests that if you had more blood than bile you would become ill. Doctors at that time believed that unbalanced humors could be caused by dog bites, poison, and poor diets. So it made sense to them that Yellow Fever could have been caused by the trash everywhere. But of course today we know illness is caused by viruses and bacteria.

Once the government got news about the doctor's diagnosis for the cause of Yellow Fever they immediately order people to go out and clean the streets. According to the book An American Plague by Jim Murphy, the people cleaning the streets to tried to prevent them catching it because they were so close to the "source" of the disease. So they soaked their clothes in vinegar and put vinegar soaked clothe in their mouths. Once people heard news and heard the church death bells ringing people fled the city. In fact, over 20,000 people out of the population of about 50,000 left Philadelphia in fear of them and their families catching the viral disease. Others locked themselves inside their houses weeks at a time. It was put in the newspaper to stay away from Yellow Fever victims and all that did was cause mass **hysteria**.

Everyone tried their own remedies to try and find a cure. Some people tried a barley, apple juice, and red wine concoction. Others chewed garlic and smeared it all over to try and prevent catching Yellow Fever. Townsfolk went into the streets to burn black powder to attempt to "purify" the air. Some people even shot guns in their house to "purify" the air. Charles Peale once said "About six firing of a musket within the House every day." That quote reveals that the people of 1793 people believed that shooting guns would purify the air. Doctor Ben Duffield, a member of the College of Physicians suggested this would stop the Yellow Fever "take warm baths regularly and inhale black pepper to become immune. Put two inches of dirt in every room of your household and replace the dirt daily." People scrubbed everything in their house with vinegar and soap to keep it clean from Yellow Fever. Real companies sold things to cure it. For example, there was "Daffey Elixir" [A.K.A pure alcohol] that supposedly cured it. They tried and tried everything, in vain[obviously], to stop Yellow Fever. All they could do was wait.

How was Yellow Fever Caused and How Did It Spread?

You may be wondering "*if Yellow Fever isn't actually caused by unbalanced humors how is Yellow Fever caused?*" Yellow Fever is infected and carried by female mosquitos. The virus they carry is called Flavivirus. The mosquito gets the virus in its body by biting an infected human or animal. Then the mosquito bites a healthy person, who then was infected and had that disease. Once a mosquito bit something that's infected, it would carry the virus forever. This fact reveals that one of the reasons Yellow Fever spread so effectively is that one mosquito could infect several people. At the time the virus came along mosquitos were everywhere. It was a hot and humid August in Philadelphia. Which are perfect living conditions for mosquitos. Therefore the population of mosquitos grew like a weed.

After a human was infected the disease traveled **urban classical domestic**, or person to person. However, Yellow Fever doesn't spread by just direct contact. But when it spread it spread fast and nobody knew it was there. That is why, according to the book An American Plague by Jim Murphy, Yellow Fever was dubbed "the invisible killer" by the people of Philadelphia. The fact that nobody knew it was there is a big reason over 5,000 people died. The first couple weeks the Yellow Fever virus was present in Philadelphia nobody cared or did anything to calm the disease down. Maybe if the government of Philadelphia reacted faster and quarantined the first few victims the epidemic could have been halted long enough for the mosquitos to die in the winter. Despite the first few people dying, many other lives could have been saved.

The Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 was a horrifying and deadly time. It took many lives and had many disturbing symptoms. People tried and failed many things to cage the beast called Yellow Fever.

And to make matters worse the people of Philadelphia had no idea how Yellow Fevers was contracted or how it spread.