Public Health and Life Expectancy

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In the first half of the 19th century, urban overcrowding, poor diets, poor sanitation, and essentially medieval medical remedies all contributed to very poor public health for the majority of English people.

The densely packed and poorly constructed working-class neighborhoods contributed to the fast spread of disease. As we read in Engels’ first hand account of working-class areas in Manchester, these neighborhoods were filthy, unplanned, and slipshod. Roads were muddy and lacked sidewalks. Houses were built touching each other, leaving no room for ventilation. Perhaps most importantly, homes lacked toilets and sewage systems, and as a result, drinking water sources, such as wells, were frequently contaminated with disease. Cholera, tuberculosis, typhus, typhoid, and influenza ravaged through new industrial towns, especially in poor working-class neighborhoods. In 1849, 10,000 people died of cholera in three months in London alone ("Public Health Timeline"). Tuberculosis claimed 60,000 to 70,000 lives in each decade of the 19th century.

People who received medical treatment in the first half of the 19th century likely worsened under the care of trained doctors and untrained quacks. Doctors still used remedies popular during the Middle Ages, such as bloodletting and leeching. They concocted toxic potions of mercury, iron, or arsenic. They also encouraged heavy use of vomiting and laxatives, both of which severely dehydrated patients and could contribute to early death, especially among infants and children whose bodies would lose water dangerously fast. Even though there were more doctors in the cities, life expectancy was much lower there than in the country.

Poor nutrition, disease, lack of sanitation, and harmful medical care in these urban areas had a devastating effect on the average life expectancy of British people in the first half of the 19th century. The Registrar General reported in 1841 that the average life expectancy in rural areas of England was 45 years of age but was only 37 in London and an alarming 26 in Liverpool. These are life-long averages that highlight a very high infant mortality rate; in the first half of the 19th century, 25 to 33% of children in England died before their 5th birthday.