

Cures and remedies

Most Irish people will have been raised without any access to the free health care we enjoy in Britain since 1948. Even if families could afford to pay a doctor, medicines like antibiotics, steroids, drugs for heart problems, treatment for asthma, skin rashes or most disorders were either not developed or widely available until late 1950s. Many families could not afford to see a doctor but some managed to keep a two-shilling piece or a half crown on the mantelpiece in case they ever needed one. People therefore had developed a range of remedies and religious rituals to treat various ailments. Certain people were also believed to be gifted with special powers or “cures” for different problems. People often travelled miles to see a bonesetter or to a blessed well or shrine to treat an injury or illness.

Some useful questions to trigger discussion

What did your family use to soothe colds and sore throats?

Were there treatments for people with “weak chests” ?

How was earache treated?

What was the remedy for toothache?

What was done for a sty on the eye?

Did you ever get chilblains? What did the old people suggest?

How many different ways of getting rid of warts do you know?

How many different ways of treating boils do you know?

Were there any regular rituals such as castor oil or nit-combing?

Did your family rely on any “cures” from people who were not doctors?

Do you know of any religious/prayer rituals for different problems?

Background information

Colds – various hot drinks with honey or milk boiled with onions. If available and permitted, a drop of whiskey or poteen was added to the hot drink to “sweat the cold out”

Sore throats – a sock filled with salt or sand and warmed and tied round the throat. Gargling with salt water was also common.

Weak chest – this usually meant asthma which was rarely diagnosed. Very old people would have used goose fat, rubbed over the back and chest and held there with brown paper or flannel.

Camphor oil and later Vicks was used. Drinks and jellies made with Carrageen Moss and flavoured with lemon were also used when family members had chesty coughs and colds. It was also believed that it was good to inhale tar fumes and when local roads were being tarred they often had an audience.

Recipe for Carageen Dessert- “a sweet cold cure”

<http://theecologycentre.ie/carrageen-sweet-dessert/>

Earache – warm olive oil dropped into the ear and held in place with cotton wool.

Toothache – generally treated with oil of cloves or chewing on a clove.

Stye – some families rubbed the stye with a wedding ring but if not working, the affected eye was covered with a big spoon heated in hot water and encased in a cloth often drew out the stye.

Chilblains are rarely seen now but were very common during winter. They were painful itchy swellings on the toes (mainly) and fingers due to exposure to cold and then warming suddenly. Some of the old remedies include urinating on them! Melrose or Germolene were strong smelling creams which were also used.

Warts – there were many remedies and rituals believed to get rid of warts. Rubbing the wart with the milk from the stem of a dandelion flower was common. Some believed that covering the wart with a piece

of meat and then burying the meat in the garden would work. Rubbing a red-topped match was also thought to help.

Boils (usually caused by blocked pores or hair follicles) were common and very painful. People who had repeated problems were encouraged to drink various potions such as nettle tea or the water cabbage is boiled in to prevent them. Applications of heat were used to bring the boil to the surface. Poultices made with bread soaked in water as hot as the person could bear were applied. Small bottles were also filled with boiling water, emptied out and placed quickly over the boil, and the suction would cause the boil to open and release the pus.

Purging rituals – it was quite common to be given castor oil or syrup of figs on a weekly basis – usually Friday or Saturday in the belief that cleansing the system helped prevent illness. Similarly most families had a weekly ritual with a nit comb.

Cures and miracles. Certain people such as the seventh son of a seventh son were believed to have special healing powers. Some people were believed to have the “cure” for some illness or another and these closely guarded secrets were handed down across generations. They often required particular prayers or devotion to a specific saint and they appeared to work equally well for humans and animals. Although there is much scientific knowledge among the public now, these traditions live on and complement professional healthcare.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/magical-mystery-cures-1.1573266>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-24165520>

Religious/prayer rituals – Irish people had various prayers or novenas to particular saints for specific illnesses e.g. St Anne for infertility, St Blaise for throat problems, St Dymphna for mental illness, St Philomena for cancer. A novena is a series of prayers that are said for nine straight days, usually as a prayer of petition but sometimes as a prayer of thanksgiving. Holy wells were and still are places where people go to drink the water, leave an offering, light a candle and pray for help, often leaving a something belonging to the sick person, a rosary or a votive candle near the well.

<https://www.holywell.seomraranga.com/holywellsireland.htm>