

Comprehension 2

Scurvy

Missing out on vitamins can make you incredibly sick. One vitamin in particular, vitamin C, is crucial to stay healthy. Without it, you can contract a horrific disease called scurvy. Before people knew about the importance of vitamins, this was fairly commonplace. I will now tell you a short story about the discovery of the connection between vitamin C and scurvy, and of how scurvy could be treated.

Stinking bad breath, swollen purple gums, easy bruising, wounds not healing, bleeding eyeballs, tiredness and death: scurvy was not a very nice disease. A few hundred years ago you could walk around any port and spot the sickly seafarers a mile off (they were the ones with no teeth). But why did sailors suffer from scurvy more than other people? For sailors in the 18th and early 19th centuries, it wasn't just the sea that was tough; life on board a ship was pretty rough as well. Conditions were really grim, and scurvy used to be the terror of the sea. Sailors feared catching scurvy more than shipwrecks, pirates or shark attacks. But for years, no one knew what caused this terrible disease.

Although they never truly tested their ideas, some ship captains thought they knew what caused scurvy. They thought it might be laziness, or the sea air, or too much hard work or even the nasty smells on the ship. They also had their favourite cures such as a cup of vinegar, burying the victims and, of course, making them do more work!

One ship's doctor, James Lind, thought that it had something to do with the food. After all, this was well before the invention of fridges, freezers and modern day preservatives. A typical meal would consist of mouldy bread, rock-hard biscuits, mouldy meat and maggot-infested bacon. Lind began to think that scurvy might be caused by something that was missing from sailors' diets. He did an experiment aboard a ship that was plagued with scurvy. He found that the sailors who ate lemons and oranges were the only ones who made a full recovery. All the others were dead or near death. Although he recognised that lemons could cure scurvy, Lind did not know about vitamin C, which was only discovered in the 1930s. In fact, lemons contain a lot of vitamin C, and this was why they were so effective at saving sailors from scurvy.

Lind wrote up his results and sent them to the head of the British Navy. It would have made sense to implement his plan straight away, in order to save the lives of many sailors. However, this did not happen. For another 40 years, the head of the navy

decided that it was cheaper to let sailors die and hire new ones, than to buy them lemons. When sailors found out about this and started to mutiny aboard ships, they were finally given lemons and were able to stop this terrible disease.

This was thought to be the end of scurvy. However, recently, there have been several children diagnosed with this same disease that sailors had 250 years ago. This was put down to the children's diet of junk food and pre-prepared meals, lacking in the vitamin C that is so important for avoiding this dangerous illness.



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Read the following article and answer the questions in complete sentences.

1. What causes scurvy?

2. What is the easiest way to know which sailor has scurvy?

3. How did James Lind find the cure to scurvy?

4. What do recent appearances of this disease suggest about some modern diets?

5. Why was the disease so common among sailors?

6. When looking for a cure for scurvy, what did James Lind do differently to the ship captains who thought they knew what caused it?
