A Brief History of Hygiene

By Joyce Furstenau

Have you ever gone camping in the wilderness? How do you bathe? How do you wash your hair? Where do you go to the bathroom? How do you keep clean when you're out in the woods with no plumbing, no electricity, and no shower?

Water was needed for farming activities so most ancient peoples lived near rivers or sources of fresh water. For many early Egyptians, washing hands was part of their religion. Egyptian priests washed four times a day. This action was a symbol of spiritual purity. Most Egyptians bathed once a day in the Nile River. The rich Egyptians did have showers. They were shallow stone trays linked to underground waste-storage jars. A person stood in the stone tray as servants poured water over him or her.

Even though early Rome had aqueducts to bring in water and sewers to carry out waste, only Roman aristocrats could afford the luxury of indoor toilets. There were about 150 public toilets, called latrines, dotting the city of Rome. Toilet seats were arranged side by side above a trough filled with running water. There was no toilet paper. We are told sponges on sticks were provided and rinsed after every use. Historians say that these public latrines (with no privacy) were actually a place where people gathered to chat and make social connections. (So much for the embarrassment factor.)

Cleanliness during this time in history was rather painful and strange. Before soap became available, people were scraped clean with a tool called a strigil. A perfumed oil was applied to the skin and then scraped off with the strigil. A strigil was a small, curved metal tool used to scrape the dirt, sweat, and oil from the body. The wealthier people often had slaves do this task for them. Emperor Augustus of Rome was said to have a face full of sores due to excessive use of the strigil. YEOW!

A Roman poet named Juvenal wrote "The greatest blessing we can ask is a sane mind in a healthy body." The early Romans kept clean by taking regular baths. Once again, most Roman homes did not have a bathroom, so citizens went to a bathhouse. The bathhouse was a building with several rooms. Each room had its own pool with varying degrees of heat. Some of them were steam rooms; others were warm or cold-water pools. By law, women and men bathed separately. By the 3rd century A.D. there were almost a thousand bathhouses in Rome. There were eleven public bathhouses that could hold up to 1,600 bathers at one time. (Rather like our present day water park, only without the swimsuits!)

By the time of the Middle Ages, cleanliness didn't seem to be a priority. Superstition and ignorance, along with diseases and rodent infestations, were everywhere. It was widely believed that being naked and letting the water touch you would make you sick. Medieval church authorities believed that public bathing was the cause of immorality and disease.

Epidemic diseases such as the bubonic plague, typhus, smallpox, and the White Death of tuberculosis took the lives of both young and old. The streets were dumping grounds for garbage and human waste. Pigs, cows, chickens, and farm animals roamed the streets freely.

People were looking for reasons why diseases were spreading. They soon found that frequent hand washing in warm water, wine, or vinegar helped. That's when keeping clean began to take on more importance. At that time, keeping clean could mean the difference between life and death.

The rich bathed more than most. In a castle, pails of water were heated on the fire and carried to the bathtub. This took a while as you can imagine. Sometimes the bathwater was treated with flower petals, perfumes, or scented oils. For the average citizen, the same bathwater was used for every member of the family before it was thrown out. Usually the youngest was last. Peasants usually did not have the luxury of a bath. They used the river when it was warm enough to bathe.

Hand washing before a meal became a practice during the Middle Ages. During the Crusades, knights brought soap from the East. Medieval towns had no drains or clean water supplies. Garbage and manure were thrown into the streets.
The latrine in a castle was called a **garderobe**. Garderobes were actually like outdoor privies that were built inside castles. They allowed the waste to drain into the moat, which was outside the castle walls. (It must have been pretty smelly around that moat.) It was common practice to use a **chamber pot** in places where a latrine or garderobe was not available. A chamber pot is a bowl-shaped container with a handle, often kept under the bed or in a cabinet. Most had lids. It was used as a urinal during the night. In the morning, the pots were emptied. During this time in history, they were emptied into the street. YUCK!

If you like living without any of the necessities of life, you would have loved living in the Middle Ages.

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**Questions**

1. Why did Egyptian priests wash their hands so often?

2. How many public toilets were said to have been part of the city of Rome?

3. The early Romans cleaned themselves with what tool?
   - A. a sword
   - B. a shovel
   - C. a razor
   - D. a strigil

4. In the Middle Ages some people believed that being naked in water would what?
   - A. make you younger
   - B. make you rich
   - C. make you sick
   - D. make you well

5. People washed their hands in warm water and what else?

6. What was the bathroom in a medieval castle called?
   - A. a garderobe
   - B. a water closet
   - C. a lavatory
   - D. a toilette

**Make a list of the ways hygiene has changed since ancient Roman times.**

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Name ____________________________
Why is hand washing so important in regards to illness? Is there a right and wrong way to wash our hands? Are their certain routines you follow when washing your hands? Explain.