

# The Victorians

## Learning Objective:

To find out about health, disease and medicine in Victorian Britain.

NEXT



When you get ill,  
what do you do to  
get better?

Think, pair, share your ideas.

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During the early part of the 19th century, there was very little medical care available. Rich people never went to hospitals but had doctors who came to their houses to treat them. Poorer people had to go to hospitals that were thought of more as a last stop before death than as a place to heal and get well again.

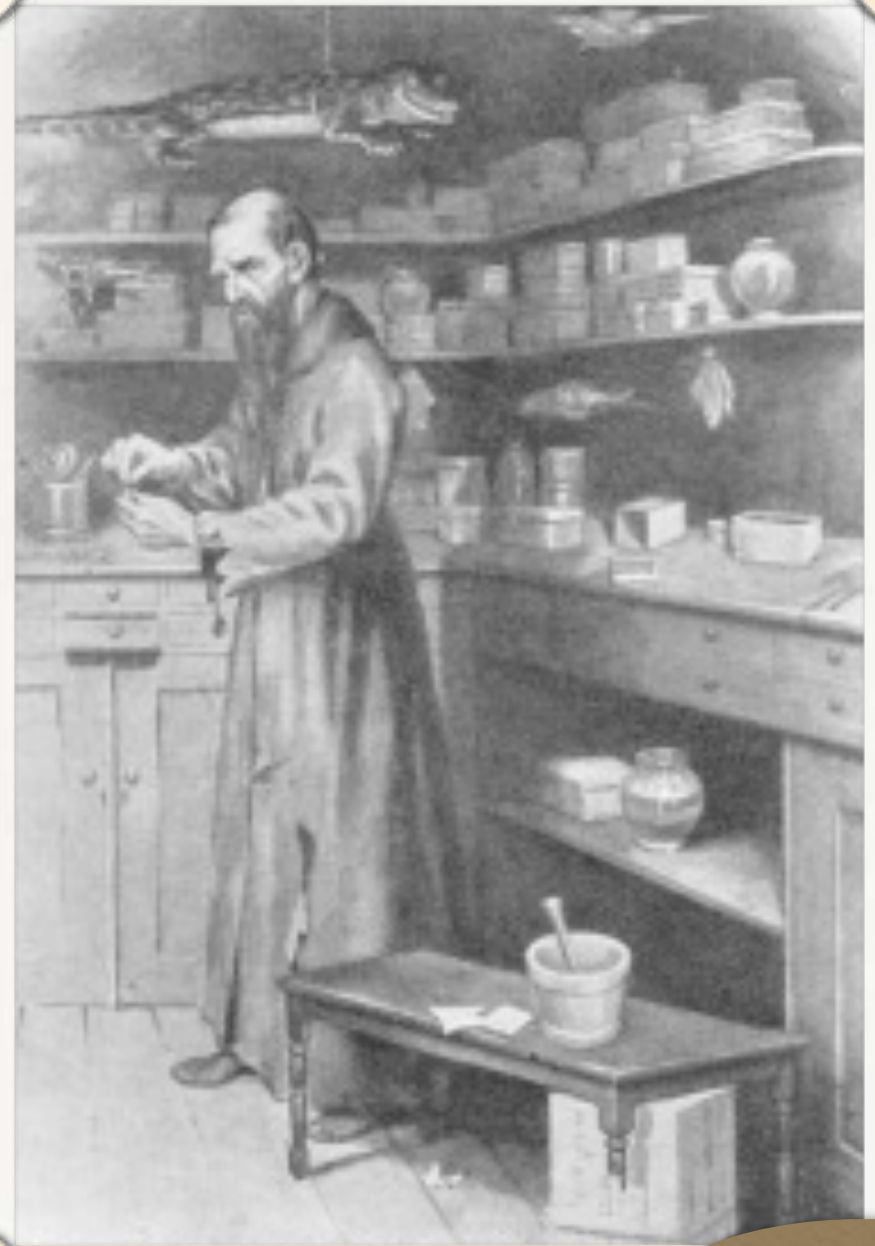


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Hospitals were usually run as charities to help those who couldn't afford to pay a doctor. They were overcrowded and unclean and it was more likely you would pick up a disease than be cured of one during a visit. Lots of people went to apothecaries who sold medicines and herbal potions and gave advice or treatment. However, apothecaries didn't have to have any training so their advice and tonics were often more harmful than helpful.

*How is this different to the medical care we have today?*



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The rise in the population in towns and cities during Queen Victoria's reign meant that diseases such as cholera, typhoid and tuberculosis were spread even more quickly than before. Typhoid was spread through body lice and dirty conditions. Tuberculosis, also known as consumption, was a disease that made the sufferer cough blood and was spread through the air by coughing or sneezing. Cholera was one of the most dreaded diseases as once the first symptom appeared the sufferer would usually only have 24 hours to live. It caused vomiting, diarrhoea and extreme thirst followed by pain in the arms, legs and stomach and was caused by human waste in the drinking water. However, in the first part of the 19th century this wasn't known and people thought that it was spread through 'miasma' or 'bad air'.

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Cholera killed 50,000 people in 1848 alone. Other big killers included smallpox, chicken pox, measles and diphtheria. In 1837 when Queen Victoria came to the throne the average life expectancy was in the late thirties. People in cities generally didn't live as long as people in

the country because of the poor conditions. One in six children died at birth and more than half of all children died before they were five years old.



BLUE STAGE OF THE SPASMOTIC CHOLERA.  
Sketch of a Girl who died of Cholera in Sunderland, November, 1831.  
*Published at the Lancet Office, 20, Strand.*

*Sunderland Museum*

ONE OF THE FIRST CHOLERA VICTIMS IN GREAT BRITAIN. A GIRL WHO  
DIED OF CHOLERA IN SUNDERLAND, NOVEMBER, 1831

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## What were hospitals like before the Victorians?

Those unfortunate enough to have to go to a hospital would have had to rest in a dirty bed on a cold, dirty and overcrowded ward. Most of the nurses had no training. If you needed surgery (if you had an infected wound or if your arms or legs had been mangled by a factory machine) a surgeon would have amputated your arm or leg without giving you any pain relief, using dirty equipment and without having washed his hands. Lots of patients died from shock or infection. Surgeons often went from treating a patient with gangrene to helping a mother give birth without washing. Over half of all people who underwent surgery died. However, gradually things changed to help improve the conditions and care that was given.

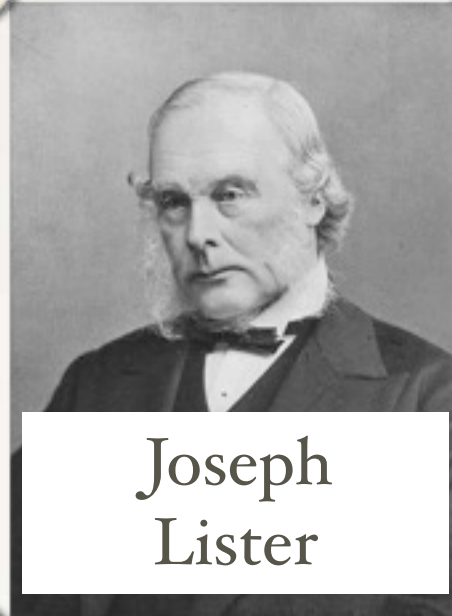
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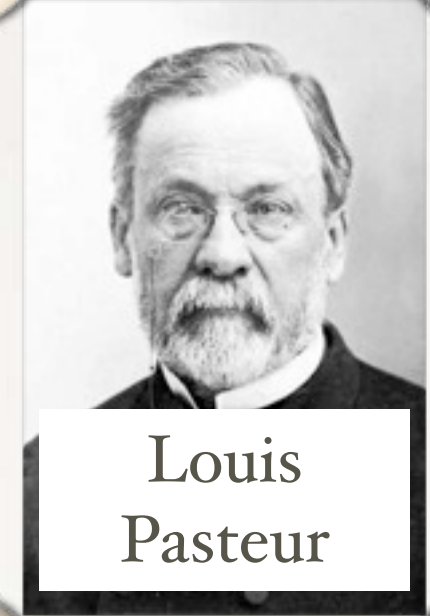
Click on the picture to find out how these people helped to change medical care:



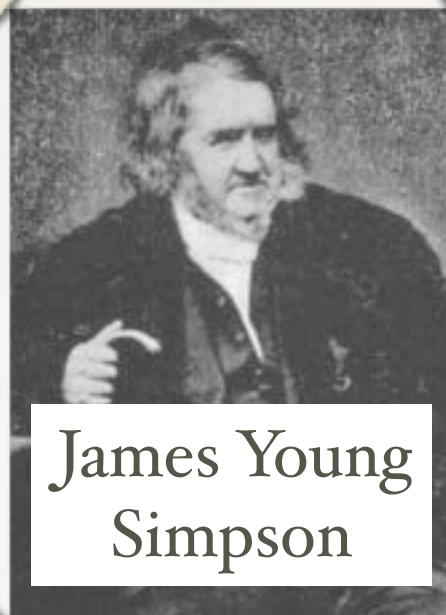
Florence  
Nightingale



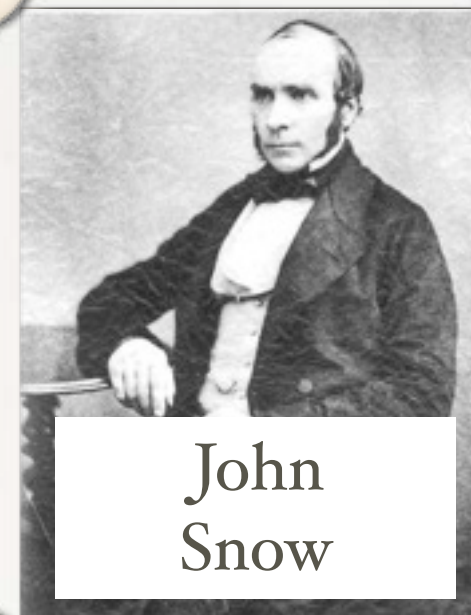
Joseph  
Lister



Louis  
Pasteur



James Young  
Simpson



John  
Snow

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## Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale was born in 1820. She came from a wealthy family and despite a marriage offer from Lord Houghton she decided that she wanted to dedicate her life to caring for others. When she told her parents that she wanted to become a nurse they were very disappointed as usually only working class women became nurses.

In 1853 the Crimean war began. Florence heard about the terrible conditions of the military hospitals and decided to travel to Turkey to help. When she arrived at the hospital she saw soldiers in poor conditions, still wearing uniforms that were dirty and covered with blood. Most of the soldiers died not from war wounds but from infections and diseases that spread through the wards.

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At first, the nurses were only allowed to clean the wards but as more wounded were brought in the doctors were forced to ask the nurses for help. Florence and the other nurses started to care for the soldiers properly by providing blankets and other supplies, by digging latrines and being highly disciplined in their care of the wounded, including wearing a nurse's uniform. The death rate dropped.

Florence Nightingale was so committed to caring for the soldiers that she often visited them during the night. For this reason she became known as 'the lady with the lamp'.



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When she returned home, she was treated as a heroine because people had heard of the amazing work she had done. She set up a nurses training school at St Thomas' Hospital which was the birth of nursing as we know it today. She was instrumental in making nursing a recognised and and respectable profession for women. She also campaigned to improve medical conditions in military camps. She continued to work on improving the



medical profession until her death in 1910 at age 90. This picture shows Florence at St Thomas' Hospital.

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## Joseph Lister

Joseph Lister was born in 1827 and when he was 26 he entered the Royal College of Surgeons. He became Professor of Surgery at Glasgow University. He was all too aware that many patients survived the trauma of surgery but then later died from what was known as 'ward fever'. At this time, people thought that infection was caused by pollution in the air, 'miasma'. Lister did some experiments and found that if wounds, hands and instruments were clean then the patients did not contract infections. He used carbolic acid to sterilise instruments and clean wounds, thus inventing antiseptics. Cases of infection reduced rapidly.

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## Louis Pasteur

Louis Pasteur was a French chemist and biologist who was born in 1822. He became Professor of Chemistry at the University of Lille in 1854. Part of his job was to solve problems in industries using science.

He discovered that organisms such as bacteria caused wine, beer and milk to sour and he discovered that these organisms could be killed by boiling the liquid and then cooling it. This is called pasteurisation after its inventor. His work also proved the germ theory of disease. Most people at the time didn't believe that tiny germs could attack the body from the outside but Pasteur proved his theory and showed how diseases were spread.

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## James Young Simpson

James Young Simpson was born in Scotland in 1811. He became a doctor who specialised in midwifery which became known as obstetrics. He is remembered for his work regarding anaesthetics. Laughing gas and ether had been used as anaesthetics in earlier years but they were not very effective, particularly ether which irritated the lungs of the patients. He discovered that chloroform in the correct dosage could put a patient to sleep so they couldn't feel any pain. To begin with, chloroform was used to help in child birth. Queen Victoria even used it for the birth of Prince Leopold in 1853. His work was the start of the widespread use of anaesthetics to relieve patients of pain.

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## John Snow

John Snow was born in 1813 in York. He was one of the doctors who helped to make anaesthetics popular and was the one to provide Queen Victoria with chloroform when she gave birth to Prince Leopold. He is also remembered for discovering that cholera was not passed from person to person through 'bad air' but due to drinking water. After an epidemic in Soho, he discovered that a water pump was the source of the disease. He knew that contaminated water was the cause of cholera and when he removed the pump handle the spread of cholera stopped. Despite this, his 'germ theories' were not accepted until the 1860s.

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How had  
medical care  
improved by the end of  
Queen Victoria's  
reign in 1901?

Discuss your ideas.

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# How medicine had changed by 1901:



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