

# Cholera in 19th-Century Britain

Use the sources to complete tasks 1-6.

In the 1800s Britain's population grew massively. With so many people moving to the towns and cities to find work in the new factories, urban areas grew without proper planning. Unsurprisingly, many diseases spread rapidly due to the cramped, over-crowded living conditions and poor sanitation. Cholera was probably the most feared. It would attack suddenly, without warning, killing many in a matter of hours or days.

## Source 1

*Giddiness, sick stomach, nervous agitation, intermittent, slow, or small pulse, cramps, beginning at the tops of the fingers and toes, and rapidly approaching the trunk... Vomiting or purging, ...of a liquid like rice-water... the features become sharp and contracted, the eyes sink, the look is expressive of terror and wildness, ...and [the] whole surface, assumes a leaden, blue, purple, black, or deep-brown tint, ...The skin is deadly cold and often damp, the tongue is moist, often white and loaded, but flabby and chilled, like a piece of dead flesh. The voice is nearly gone; the respiration quick, irregular, and imperfectly performed. The patient... struggles for breath, and often lays his hand on his heart to point out the seat of his distress.*

A description of the symptoms of cholera by the British Government's Board of Health, 1831.

## Source 2

*The patients should be immediately put to bed, wrapped up in hot blankets, and warmth should be sustained by other external applications, such as repeated frictions with flannels and camphorated [strong-smelling] spirits; poultices [pastes] of mustard and linseed (equal parts) to the stomach, particularly where pain and vomiting exist; similar poultices to the feet and legs to restore their warmth. The returning heat of the body may be promoted by bags containing hot salt or bran, applied to different parts of it.*

A poster created by Gateshead Board of Health, 1831.

## Source 3

*It has been the means of saving innumerable lives, and never known to fail in the cure of Spasmodic Cholera, if one dose only be taken on the first symptoms appearing. It is equally efficacious [effective] in Dysentery, and all Spasmodic Complaints of the Stomach, of which the most respectable testimonials can be given, if required.*

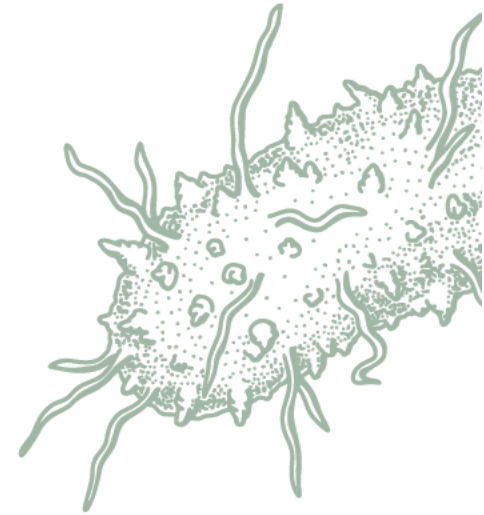
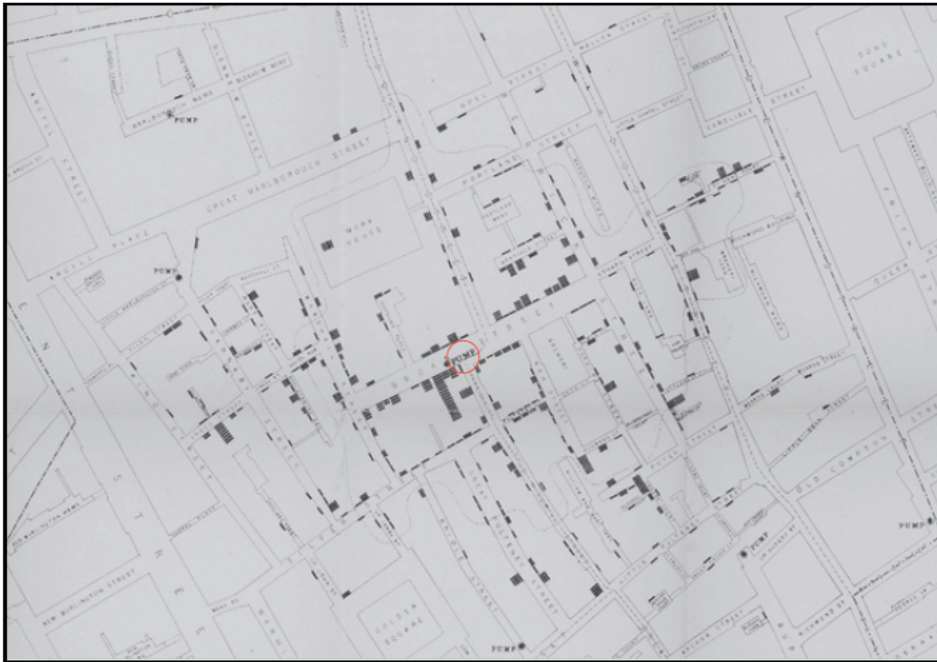
*This Tincture is so innocent in its nature, that it may be given to an Infant, being free from Laudanum or any deleterious drugs. It will keep any length of time and in any climate without losing its efficacy [effectiveness]; it is therefore strongly recommended to all Persons, Captains of Vessels, and others, going abroad.*

A poster advertising a medicine claiming to cure cholera, 1832.

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Use the sources to answer questions 1-6.

## Source 4



Wellcome Collection (1855) A map taken from a report by Dr John Snow.  
Available under public domain at: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/uxgfft62>  
(Accessed: 13 Nov 2023).

## Tasks

- 1 Read Source 1. Identify five symptoms of cholera.
- 2 Source 1 was produced by the British Government's Board of Health. Why do you think they did this? Explain your answer.
- 3 Study Source 2 and Source 3. Explain how people tried to cure cholera in the 1831-32 outbreak in Gateshead.
- 4 Study Source 2 and Source 3. What do these sources suggest about people's understanding of the causes of cholera in 1831?
- 5 Source 4 shows a map of an area of London and the number of cases of cholera close to a water pump (circled). What conclusion do you think Dr John Snow came to from this evidence?
- 6 Using your own knowledge and all of the sources, what laws would you recommend the government make in order to prevent another outbreak of cholera?