The Tudors

Learning Objective:
To find out about diseases in Tudor Britain and how these diseases were treated.

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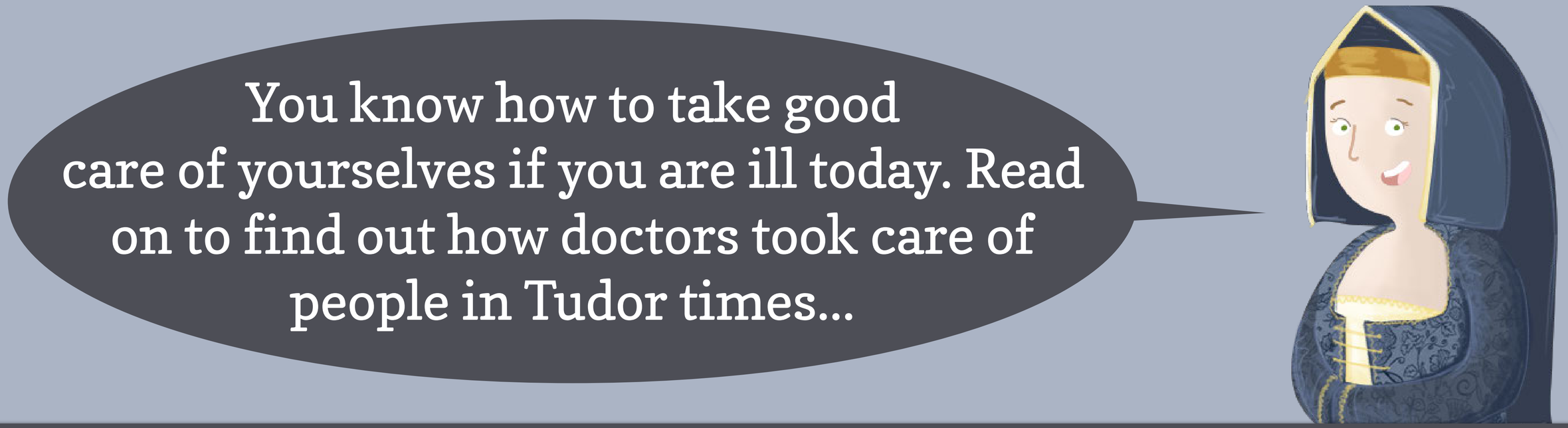
Mike isn't feeling at all well. He has a blocked nose, a headache, a cough and he is very hot.

What would you suggest Mike does to make sure he feels better?

In Tudor times, people didn't know nearly as much about the body and about diseases as we do today. They didn't know that lots of diseases are caused by germs or how the body worked on the inside. Because of this, people had a much lower life expectancy than today and few people lived past their 40th birthday. The life expectancy in Britain today is around 80 years. This is double the length the average Tudor would have lived for.





A Tudor doctor

The Tudors thought two main things were responsible for diseases, one of which was bad air. They thought diseases were carried in the air and seeped into your skin. The plague was one of the diseases they believed was caused in this way. The plague was the biggest killer in the Tudor period. In 1563 alone, more than 17,000 people in London died of the plague. This was a sixth of the whole London population. Doctors wore beak masks which they stuffed with sweet-smelling flowers that they believed purified the air. In fact, the plague was carried by rats and passed to people through the rat's fleas.

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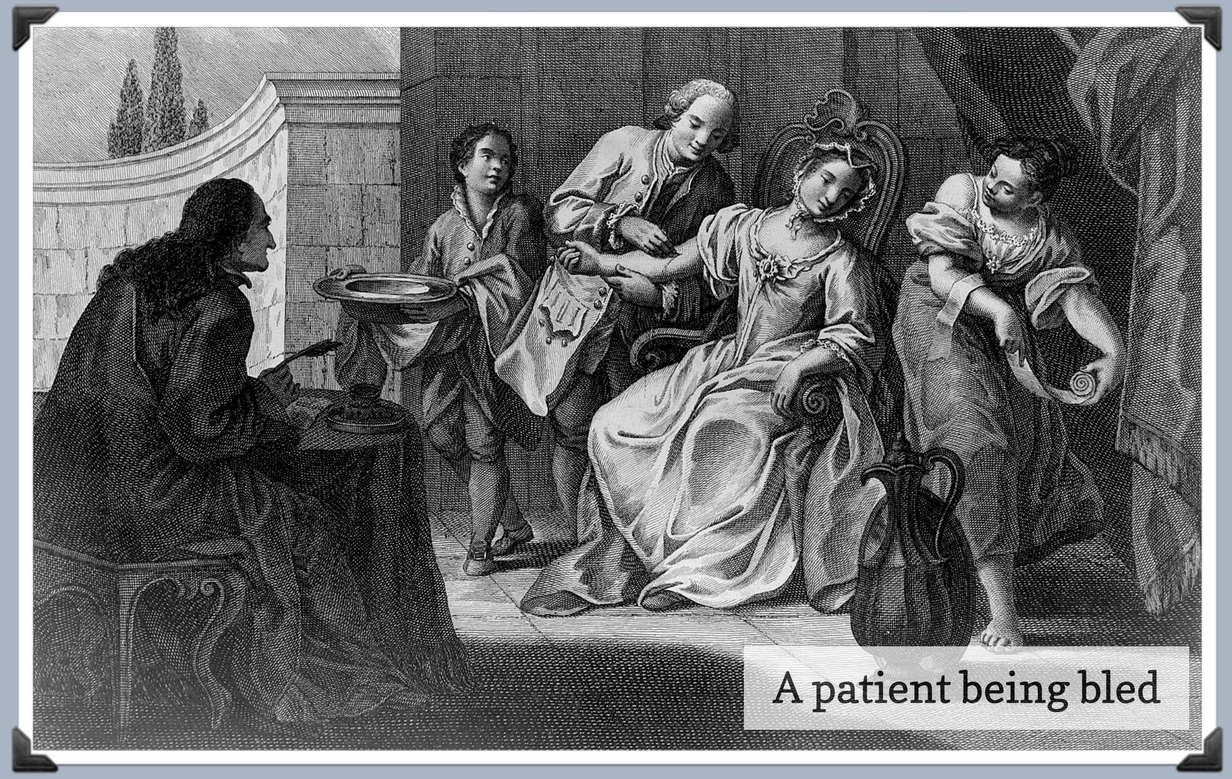
Only the rich could afford to see a doctor. Doctors would be trained at a university and were taught the theories that had been passed down from the ancient Greeks. The main belief of Tudor doctors was that the body was made up of four liquids called humours. The four humours were red bile, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. You became ill if these humours were out of balance.

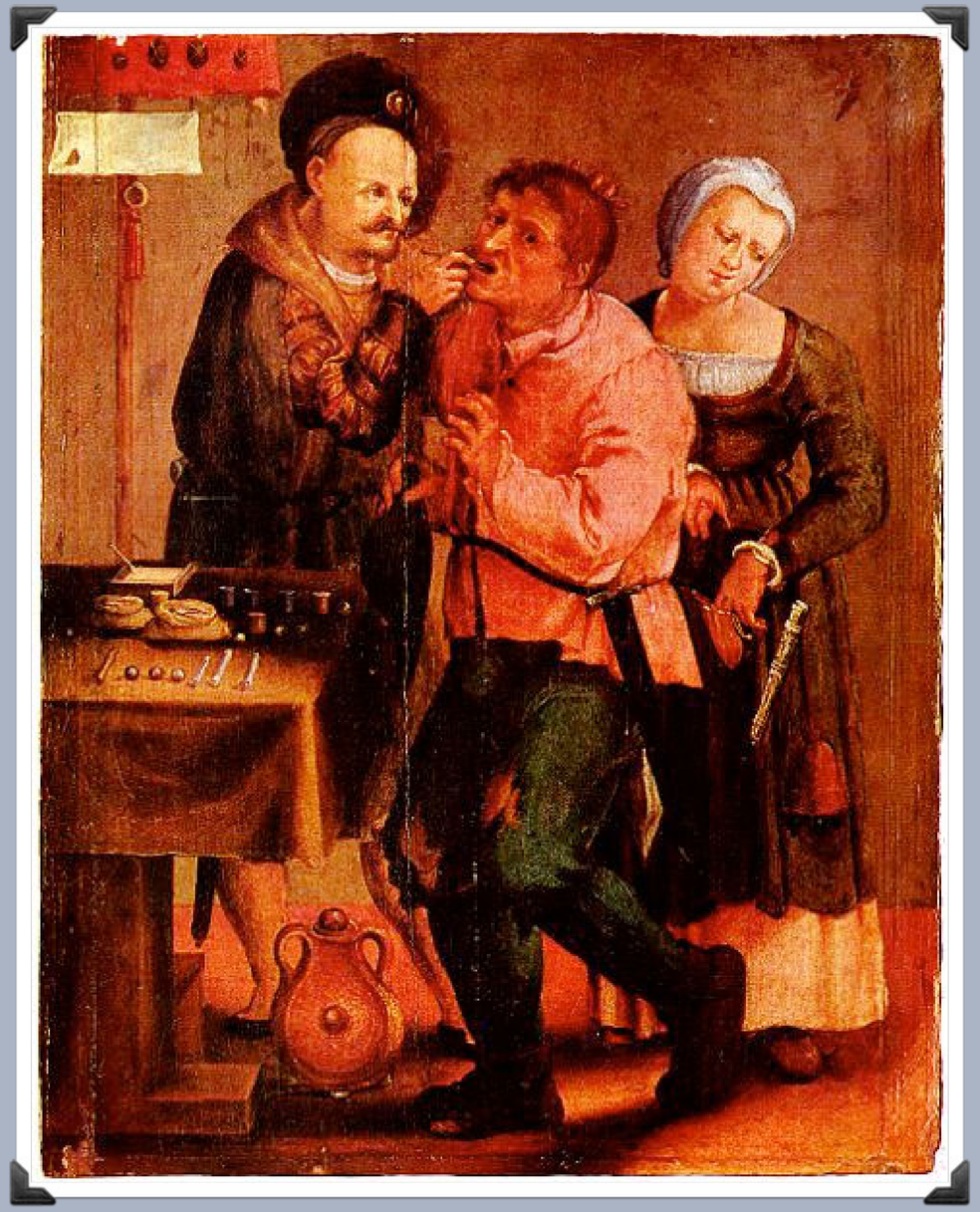


A patient being bled

One of the most popular treatments for lots of different illnesses was bleeding a patient. This involved either cutting the patient to release the blood or putting blood-sucking leeches onto the skin.

As well as doctors, there were also barber surgeons. Barber surgeons were responsible for looking after soldiers during battles and would often perform amputations (cutting off fingers, arms, toes and legs that were damaged or infected). During times of peace, barber surgeons were also dentists and barbers.

Surgeons and doctors had no anaesthetic to stop the patient from feeling the pain so a visit to the barber surgeon was always sure to hurt!



Even though it was only the wealthy who could afford doctors, they were not usually cured any more effectively than the poor were. This was because the doctors knew nothing about what caused infections or how to prevent them. Even their most popular treatment, bleeding, often caused more harm than good. We know now that bleeding a patient makes them weaker instead of stronger. We also know that performing any kind of surgery or treatment without washing your hands or the instruments you use, will pass germs and infections from one person to another.



The doctor in this picture is looking at the urine of the sick woman. This was one of the ways Tudor doctors worked out what was wrong with you. They even tasted the urine sometimes!

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For ordinary people during Tudor times, doctors were out of the question as they were too expensive. Instead they relied on folk cures which were usually herbal remedies that had been passed down through generations. We know today that lots of herbs are very helpful for certain illnesses but the Tudors also had some very strange folk cures, such as wearing the skin of a donkey if you had rheumatism (a disease which makes your joints swell and makes moving painful) or passing a baby over a donkey to cure a cough!

For those who didn't grow their own herbs, an apothecary would mix up potions and give advice for illnesses. An apothecary was like a chemist. This picture shows the inside of an apothecary's shop.



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Check out these Tudor cures…!



Symptom	Cure
Toothache	Burn a candle and let the smoke go in your mouth. The smoke will kill the worms causing your toothache.
Smallpox	Hang red curtains around the bed. The red light will cure the disease.
Headache	Drink a mixture of lavender, sage and rose petals. Or press a hangman's rope to your head.
Scrofula (a type of tuberculosis)	Go and ask for an audience with the king. He will be able to cure you by his touch.
Gout	Cut a mouse in half and rub it on your feet.
Upset stomach	Take a mixture of sage and mint.
Cough	Eat spiders in butter or pass a baby over a donkey.

Do you think you would have preferred to have been treated by a Tudor doctor or by Tudor folk cures? Why?



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Are you ready to go and do some work on Tudor diseases and cures on your own?

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Plenary:

We are very lucky today that we understand so much about the human body and ways to cure illnesses and diseases. Tudor cures seem very silly to us but in those days, they were the best they had. However, we still don't know everything about how to cure diseases.



Lots of scientists and charities are trying to find cures for diseases, such as Cancer Research.

How important do you think it is to keep trying to find out more about diseases and how they can be cured?

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