

## Health and Medicine with the Corps of Discovery

President Thomas Jefferson knew that no doctors would accompany the expedition and that there were no hospitals to be found once the crew left the St. Louis area. He therefore sent Meriwether Lewis to Philadelphia to spend three months learning not just the scientific subjects of biology, botany, zoology and map making, but how to take care of his expeditions health needs.

Dr. Benjamin Rush was Lewis' contact with the American Philosophical Society. Dr. Rush was considered to be one of the leading physicians and thinkers of his time. Dr. Rush had signed the Declaration of Independence as a Pennsylvania delegate in 1776, was instrumental in stopping a yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia in 1793, and with John Adams was thought to have authored several of the so-called "Federalist Papers" in support of the US Constitution as it was being ratified by the states after the Constitutional Convention.

In a letter to President Jefferson (June 11, 1803) found among President Jefferson's papers in the Library of Congress' archives, Dr. Rush listed his "Rules for preserving good health." Among the theories Dr. Rush proposed were:

- > **When** you feel the least indisposition, do not attempt to overcome it by labor or marching. Rest in a horizontal position. Also, fasting and diluting drinks for a day or two will generally overcome an attack of fever. To those preventatives of disease may be added a gentle sweat obtained by warm drinks, or gently opening the bowels by means of one, two or more of the purging pills.
- > **Want** of appetite is otherwise a sign of approaching indisposition. It should be banished by taking one or more of the purging pills.
- > **In** difficult and laborious enterprises or marches, eating sparingly will enable you to bear them with less fatigue and more safety to your health.
- > **Flannel** should be worn constantly next to the skin, especially in wet weather.
- > **The** less spirits you use, the better.
- > **Molasses** or sugar victuals with a few drops of the acid of vitriol will make a pleasant and wholesome drink with your meals.
- > **Washing** your feet every morning in cold water will fortify them against the notion of cold.

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> **After** long marches or much fatigue from any work, you will be more refreshed from lying down in a horizontal position for two hours than by resting a much longer time in any other position of the body.

>**Shoes** made without heels by affording equal action to all the muscles of the legs will enable you to march with less fatigue than shoes made in the ordinary way.

As awkward and strange as these rules seem today, you must remember that only one man died on the trip and conventional theory suggests his appendix burst and there wasn't too much that Lewis could have done to help him. Dr. Rush prepared a list of medical supplies for the expedition: total cost \$90.69. Among the items purchased in St. Louis were:

Lancets	Laudanum/Opium
Forceps	Glauber salts (sodium sulfide)
Tourniquets	Niter (potassium nitrate/saltpeter)
Clysters Syringes	Tartar emetic (1100 doses)
Gonorrhea syringes	Calomel
Peruvian bark (quinine-3500 doses)	mercurial ointment
Jalap (purgative)	

Chief among the medicines was 50 dozen Dr. Rush's patented pills (also known as 'Thunderclappers'). The pills that Dr. Rush refers to were concocted by him as a means of purging (vomiting and diarrhea) the system. According to historian Steven Ambrose, "Dr. Rush thought these pills would cure any number of ills. The pills were composed of calomel (a mixture of six parts mercury to one part chlorine), and jalap. Each portion of the concoction was a purgative of explosive power...the combination was awesome." Dr. Rush suggested that if one pill didn't do the trick, you could take two or three.

In their early journals, references to health care are frequent. Capt. William Clark recorded that:

"I have a bad cold with a sore throat." June 3, 1804.

On June 16th, Clark observes

"the Mosquitoes and Ticks are numerous & bad."

On June 17th, Clark writes

"the party is much afflicted by boils and several have deassentary which I contribute to the water (which is muddy)."

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On July 4th (near present day Atchison, Kansas), Sgt. Ordway wrote:

"Fields got bit by a snake, which was quickly doctored by bark by Cap. Lewis. A poultice of bark and gunpowder was sufficient to cure the wound."

Also on July 4th, Pvt. Whitehouse noted:

"The day mighty hot when we went to toe the Sand, (s)calded our (feet) some fled from the rope...had to put on our mockisons."

On July 7th, near St. Michael's Meadow (present day St. Joseph, Missouri), Clark wrote:

"...one man verry sick, struck with the Sun. Capt. Lewis bled him and gave Niter which has revived him much."

July 8th saw

"...five men sick today with a violent head ake &c."

By July 10th Clark had written

"our men all getting well but much fatigued."

And, so it goes: The men were chased by bears, teased by prairie dogs, fell off river bluffs, suffered mild frostbite, and acquired a variety of other ills and complaints along the way. Lewis nearly died on the return trip when he was accidentally shot in the hip (buttocks) by Pierre Cruzatte during an elk hunt. He writes on October 18, 1806:

"...with the assistance of Sgt. Gass I took off my cloaths and dressed my wounds myself as well as I could, introducing tents of patent lint in the ball holes, the wound bleed considerably but I was happy to find that it had touched neither bone nor artery...my wounds being so situated that I could not move without infinite pain...as it was painful to me to be removed I slept on board the perogue; the pain I experienced excited a high fever and I had a very uncomfortable night."

Adapted from

<http://www.lewisandclarktrail.com/medical.htm>

