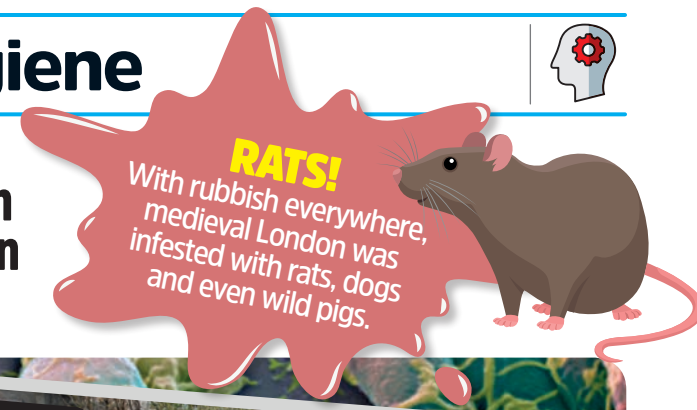




The messy history of hygiene

How did people in the past stay clean and healthy?



On 7 April, people around the planet will celebrate World Health Day. This event, which has been marked for more than 60 years, is organised by the World Health Organisation (WHO), an international agency that is devoted to improving peoples' health all over the world.

One of the best ways of protecting your health is through hygiene – the things you do every day to keep your home and your body clean. Many

diseases are caused by tiny organisms called germs. By keeping clean, you can prevent harmful germs from multiplying and making you ill.

Today, because almost everyone in the UK has access to showers, washing machines and toilets, staying clean seems easy. In the past, though, hygiene was a constant challenge.

Take a look at some of the strange ways people tried to stay clean.

Roman cities

500BC-AD500

At its peak, the Roman Empire stretched from the deserts of Egypt to the borders of Scotland. In the lands they conquered, the Romans built roads and forts, but they also built baths. Keeping clean was an important part of Roman culture, and public baths where people could exercise, chat and bathe in hot and cold pools, were at the heart of every Roman city. The Romans also built water channels called aqueducts – which supplied their cities with clean water – and sewers, which flushed away waste. The Romans even built public toilets. By AD500 the Roman Empire had broken apart. A lot of Roman knowledge was lost, including the skills that had been used to keep cities clean. For more than 1,000 years, most settlements in Europe had no proper sewers and limited clean water.



Medieval Europe

AD400-1400

Medieval towns and cities were some of the dirtiest in history. Houses, markets, workshops and animal pens were jumbled together – all creating lots of mess. Waste was dumped into the streets or into ditches and rivers, poisoning the water supply. Many people at the time, however, did their best to stay clean. It was considered hygienic to wash every morning with water from a bowl and also to rinse your hands before and after meals. Baths were less common, because it was difficult to prepare enough hot water, but most towns had bathhouses where people washed in huge wooden tubs. Even the poorest people would take a dip in a river when the weather was good or after a particularly dirty job.

This close-up shows the type of bacteria that gives you food poisoning.

Science and industry

AD1760-1900

During the period known as the Industrial Revolution, advances in science and engineering transformed life in the UK. Cities became more overcrowded than ever as millions of people moved from the countryside to work in factories. In London, the Thames became the most polluted river in the world, and diseases such as cholera, which spread through dirty water, killed thousands of people. Science and engineering also began to make life more hygienic. In the summer of 1858, a time known as the "Great Stink", the smell of the Thames became so disgusting that politicians voted to build London a huge new sewer system. Victorian scientists also proved that many diseases were caused by invisible organisms – germs – which could pass from person to person in dirty water and on dirty hands.



Hygiene today

Throughout the 20th century, people around the world gradually began to adopt new hygiene practices designed to prevent the spread of germs. These included using water from a clean source for drinking and cooking, keeping toilet areas clean and washing hands with soap, especially after using the toilet and before handling food. Today, basic hygiene is recognised as a human right – something that everyone in the world should have – but there is still a long way to go. In 2015, the WHO reported that 663 million people still did not have a reliable source of clean water and that 2.4 billion people (just under a third of the world's population) did not have a hygienic toilet. The United Nations (a group of 193 countries that work together to maintain peace and security) is working with other organisations to make sure that everyone can live in hygienic conditions.

Brushing your teeth

The first toothbrushes that were similar to the ones we use today were made in England in the 1770s. Before then, all sorts of things were used to keep teeth clean. The ancient Chinese chewed on twigs; the ancient Greeks and Romans made a powder a bit like toothpaste from crushed oyster shells and bones. However, not everyone took good care of their teeth. Due to her love of sugary treats, Queen Elizabeth I's teeth turned black. So many fell out that foreign visitors reported that they found it difficult to understand what she said.



OUT OF THIS WORLD...

In space, water is a limited and precious resource. Toilets on the International Space Station recycle astronauts' urine, turning it into clean drinking water.

WOW!
The Roman baths at Khenchela in Algeria are still in use today, 2,000 years after they were built.

