

Jack London's Medical History

A look at the ailments Jack suffered during his life and some of the “medicine” he took for these ailments, leaves one in awe at how much he was able to accomplish during his short lifetime.

Ailments

alcohol abuse (at times)

amoebic dysentery (while covering the Mexican Revolution and on board the Snark)

ataxia (unsteady on feet)

boils

chilblains (itchy, swollen and painful lumps or patches on skin when exposed to cold)

dental problems

depression

diarrhea

diphtheria (in childhood)

edema

flat feet (pes planus)

food poisoning

frostbite

gari-gari (tropical malady also known as “scratch-scratch”)

gonorrhea

gout

grippe (flu - on SS Siberia in route to cover Russian-Japanese conflict)

hand swelling

headaches

hemorrhoids

high blood pressure

hives

insomnia (and terrible nightmares)

knee – injured in accident

malaria

nail growth (excessive)

nausea (chronic)

nervous itch caused by salt¹

neuralgia in jaw

¹ Jack self-diagnosed himself with this salt reaction in a letter to Ninetta in 1909. He wrote that in the past, too much salt caused him to have a nervous itch and he now believed the salt water in the tropics was similarly harming his health.

ngari-ngari²
nicotine addiction
pellagra (Vit. B3/niacin deficiency)
pleurisy
psoriasis
pyorrhea or periodontitis
rectal fistulas
renal colic (kidney stones blocking urinary tract)
renal nephritis (inflammation of spaces between kidney tubules)
rheumatism
ringworm (also known as “barber’s itch,” or tinea barbae)
scurvy (in Yukon)
shingles (on Sophie Sutherland)
skin peeling
sprained ankle (on SS Siberia en route to cover Russian-Japanese conflict; also injured an ankle when thrown from horse cart)
sunburn (severe - in Hawaii from surfing)
thumb – accidentally cut off part of it
tonsillitis
uremia (occurs when kidneys are unable to filter out waste properly)³
yaws (South Seas - also known as “Solomon Sores,” a bacteriological infection belonging to same group of bacteria that causes syphilis; spread by contact with the broken skin of someone who has it)⁴

Some of the medications Jack took for his ailments would have posed a further risk to his health.

Medications

aconite (comes from a poisonous plant and historically used to treat gout, inflammation, pain relief; Jack also used it as a relaxant)
arsenic (see also Salvarsan - historically used for variety of ailments including as antimicrobial, antiviral, antiparasitic)⁵

² Ngari-ngari, gari-gari, and scratch-scratch likely refer to the same affliction. Jack wrote that “gari-gari” translated to “scratch scratch” and was a “sort of vegetable [sic] poisoning like poison oak or poison ivy.” Charmian called it “bush poisoning.” Not to be confused with Ngari, a febrile virus carried by mosquitos but associated with Africa, not the south seas, or “Gari”/“garri,” a type of West African food from cassava flour, or “Gari Gari,” a greeting in one part of Africa.

³ Listed on Jack’s death certificate along with renal colic and interstitial nephritis. It’s widely believed Jack’s use of the corrosive mercuric sublimate contributed to his renal failure.

⁴ Other ailments or injuries included: the last week of December 1902, Jack was bed ridden after “a heavy box of books fell on me, striking me in a vital place;” February 1914, he was cut and bruised in an auto accident in New York; and in 1913, Jack complained of pain near his heart.

⁵ Jack was given arsenic in the Australian hospital, possibly for yaws, and he later complained about an arsenic slough on his cheek. In Jack’s day, arsenic was even sold in wafer form to women as a cosmetic aid to improve complexion.

atropine sulfate (related to belladonna)
belladonna (from a poisonous plant and historically used for gastro-intestinal problems among other medicinal uses; Jack also used as a relaxant)
bismuth subgallate (for dysentery and for other gastro-intestinal problems)
camphor capsules (for coughs and colds)
cholera pills (for diarrhea)
emetine (for pyorrhea)
hyoscyamine (used for gastro-intestinal and bladder problems)
mercury chloride (also known as “corrosive sublimate” to treat yaws)⁶
opiates (heroin [“Terpin Hydrate and Heroin” were OTC⁷ medications routinely used at the time to treat colds and as cough suppressant], morphine, opium)
quinine – for malaria
salvarsan (arsenic treatment for syphilis and yaws)
strontium sulphate (may have been used for dental pain and now used in red coloring and pyrotechnics)
strychnine (poison but historically used as a stimulant)

Some of Jack’s ailments necessitated surgery.

Surgeries:

Non-malignant tumor surgically removed (3/23/1905 Oakland)
Rectal fistula/bowel surgery (11/30/1908 Australia)
Appendicitis (7/6/1913; surgery performed in Oakland on July 8th by Dr. William S. Porter who tells Jack his kidneys are in bad shape)⁸
Dental surgeries (multiple; he lost all of his upper teeth by 1913 and used an upper plate)⁹

Lupus or Bipolar?

We do not know if Jack suffered from either lupus¹⁰ or a bipolar

⁶ Jack also treated yaws with blue vitriol (copper sulfate) and iodoform (disinfectant), lime juice and hydrogen peroxide, boracic acid and Lysol, and antiphlogistine (to sooth inflammation).

⁷ OTC - Over the counter.

⁸ Dr. Porter joked with one of Jack’s daughters that he was now a world traveler because it was the second time he had been in London.

⁹ Jack obtained a human skeletal head in Hawaii upon which he practiced his dentistry skills.

¹⁰ Lupus is an autoimmune disease where the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy tissues and organs, leading to inflammation and damage. It can have many symptoms including skin rashes, with the most common being the butterfly rash, which appears across the cheeks and nose. C.W. Denko, M.D., wrote an article hypothesizing that Jack’s scurvy in the Yukon, acute sunburn in Hawaii, itchy rash, swollen joints, dental, renal and other issues could have all been symptoms of lupus and/or linked to an associated autoimmune disease, Sjogren’s disease. Dr. Denko proffered that the quinine Jack took for malaria would have improved his lupus symptoms. He notes the irony that a man whose nickname was “wolf,” might have died from the “wolf disease.” (Lupus means wolf in Latin.)

Disorder,¹¹ although there has been much speculation that he had each of these. Some experts believe that Jack's mysterious illness¹² in Australia was lupus. Other medical professionals believe his malady was the result of the mercury chloride treatment he used for yaws, noting that "[d]ermal contact with mercuric chloride can cause severe dermatitis with swelling and irritation of the hands, feet, cheeks, and nose," and other neurological effects.

Salvarsan, with its arsenic base, can cause physical and psychological effects as well. After they abandoned the Snark voyage and returned home to the Beauty Ranch, Jack believed he was suffering from the lingering effects of yaws so began taking Salvarsan. Salvarsan was touted as an amazing new remedy for both yaws and syphilis. It could attack the bladder, the kidneys, cause increased weight along with "transient symptoms of nephritis," and attack "the nerves" producing "an illusion of manic good health, followed by severe depression."

As for the bipolar disorder, Jack's "long sickness," his dark moods and depression are well documented by Charmian and others, as are what might be perceived as "manic" or abnormally elevated periods. As with lupus, however, there is no way of knowing whether this was bipolar disorder, depression, or the side effects from his mercury and arsenic "treatments."

Jack amassed quite a collection of medical books, subscribed to both medical and dental journals, and annotated these medical treatises with notes. Jack "got as addicted to home medicine and dentistry as he had to amateur navigation. He felt he could treat everybody from his medicine chest and his reference library." Jack's medical interest spilled over into his lectures and he often shared stories about acting as an amateur doctor. One biographer described this medical interest as "morbid" and suggests Jack became a bit of a valetudinarian.¹³ There's some evidence to support this. Jack feared that his bad cough was tuberculosis, that his hemorrhoids were rectal cancer, and that his psoriasis was either leprosy or syphilis; he had none of these diseases.

The sad irony is that instead of helping him, Jack's commitment to finding the best "medicines" of his day, likely hastened his own death.

¹¹ A bipolar disorder is a mental disorder characterized by episodes of mania (great energy) and depression.

¹² In Australia, Jack said his "hands were twice their normal size, with seven dead and dying skins peeling off at the same time. There were times when my toe-nails, in twenty-four hours, grew as thick as they were long . . ." This condition baffled his Australian doctors.

¹³ A person unduly anxious about their health.

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