

# Aztec Healing: Medicine, Magic, and Prayer

Using a mix of science, superstition, and religion, the Aztec could look forward to much healthier and longer lives than most contemporary Europeans. The Spanish conquistadores gleaned a wealth of knowledge from Aztec healing practices.

Life expectancy was limited in early modern Europe: Reaching the age of 70 without suffering any serious illness would have been an astonishing achievement. Yet it was a fairly unremarkable occurrence among the citizens of the great Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, today's Mexico City. As the Spanish conquistadores embarked on the conquest of what is now Mexico, one of the things that surprised them most was the good health and longevity enjoyed by the inhabitants of the great Aztec Empire.

There were several immediate reasons as to why the Aztec could boast such good health. Their diet, consisting mainly of poultry, fish, cereals, fruit, and vegetables, would today be considered very cardio-healthy. High standards of personal

and household hygiene throughout the city were another contributing factor. What amazed the invaders most, however, was the knowledge and skill of Aztec physicians, whom the Spaniards admitted were better—and cheaper—than their European counterparts. “They have doctors skilled in the application of a wide variety of herbs and medicines,” wrote Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who compiled the 16th-century study of Aztec life known as the Florentine Codex. “Some have experience of grave illnesses that Spaniards have long endured without hope, and which these doctors are able to cure.”

## Science and Shamanism

The Aztec applied their worldview to bodily health; magic, religion, and medicine were all linked for them with



## EXPERTS IN ANTIDOTES

**AS WELL AS USING** maguey and tobacco to treat snakebites, the Aztec also developed the technique of using the venom itself as an antidote. To extract it, the snakes were paralyzed using a special herb called *picietl*, then restrained.

**DIORITE RATTLESNAKE, 16TH CENTURY**



illnesses believed to be an imbalance in the vital force, or *tonalli* (hotness) of the body. Such misfortunes were blamed on breaking social taboos and were often attributed to the actions of gods or people who practiced black magic.

Yet their medical system was exemplary for the age. The Aztec had a range of doctors, allowing patients to select a specialist according to their ailment. The treatments included both spiritual and natural cures. Working alongside the more scientific doctors, or *tictli*, were the shamans and sorcerers, the *nahuallis*, who used magic and hallucinogenic plants. Meanwhile priests





**THE VICTIM** of a spider bite is massaged by doctors in this illustration from the Florentine Codex.

ART ARCHIVE

sought to cure people through a combination of prayer and penitence.

The *tictli* were organized into a wide array of specialties. For example, there were army surgeons, who owed their deep knowledge of anatomy to their lengthy study of sacrificial cadavers. They learned that to avoid infection the first step in treating a wound is to apply urine directly onto it as a sterilizing agent. They would then apply astringent herbs and a substance derived from eggs. To stop hemorrhages, the wound would be covered with coagulating herbs to help form scars, and, if necessary, stitched with human hair or attached with natural

“staples” made from the jaws of a particular ant. This innovative procedure was carried out by pulling together the edges of the wound, to which the live ant was applied. At the very moment the insect sunk its jaws into the skin, its head would be cut off, thus stapling the wound together. If a patient suffered during such a procedure, they might be given pain-killing herbs to chew.

### From Cradle to Grave

Bonesetters also played a role in Aztec medicine. Fractures were treated with splints and plaster casts or, in extreme cases, bone grafts: “The bone itself must

be scraped and smoothed, then a brand soaked in resin inserted deep into the marrow of the broken bone to make it rigid. The whole is then firmly bound up.” They also had “cardiologists,” whose study of study of human sacrifice victims allowed them to create a catalog of cardiovascular conditions. There were also doctors who we would today recognize as ear, nose, and throat specialists. What’s more, thanks to their in-depth knowledge of plants and herbs, the Aztec excelled in treating digestive problems and skin conditions, even tackling cosmetic issues such as hair loss and dandruff.

Aztec opticians were skilled in treating what was termed the “overleafing of the eyes”—cataracts—“by cutting the membrane with a spike or thorn and putting in drops.” The Aztec could also visit excellent dentists, who not only treated toothache and abscesses but also carried out complex cosmetic surgery. This included embedding gemstones such as turquoise into the teeth. Archaeological finds seem to suggest that having a gemstone smile was considered a mark of social distinction among the Aztec. Yet for all their knowledge of herbal remedies, the medical instruments used by Aztec physicians appear crude. Many were made of stone, though this does not seem to have made them any less effective.

### Madness and Motherhood

In addition to the doctors who treated these bodily ailments, people with more emotional or psychosomatic conditions were looked after by specialists called the *tetonaltih*. These doctors would often use dream interpretation to restore the patient’s inner balance. Sometimes the symptoms were interpreted as signs of madness, which the Aztec categorized into several types. It is also thought that Aztec physicians recognized the symptoms of epilepsy and offered treatment for the condition. In certain codices and manuscripts the goddess Tlazoltéotl was represented as experiencing the symptoms of this illness.

The city also boasted no shortage



# Natural remedies: An Aztec cure for almost everything

**THE MEDICAL TREATMENTS** recorded in the Florentine Codex (1575-77) relate to a wide range of wounds and ailments, including fractures, bruises, and other types of lesions due to accidents. Treatments extended to infections, muscular afflictions, and internal disorders.



BONE FRACTURES WERE TREATED using powder ground from the roots of a plant, which was applied to the wound. The limb was then wrapped in a cloth and put in a splint.



THOSE SUFFERING BLADDER CONDITIONS “must be injected with the powder ground from the root known as *cacamótic*.” A potion made from the tail of a creature known as *tlacuatzin* was also prescribed.



BRUISES CAUSED BY BEATINGS were treated by the application of an antibiotic known as *popaualizpatli*. Afterwards, the patient would be bathed and given water mixed with the root *iztacpatli*.

of *cocaxcalli*: houses to care for the ill. “Montezuma had in his palace a place to care for the incurably and mentally ill, a hospice attached to the main temple. This was dedicated to the god Nanahuatl, and it was where lepers and albinos and others were cared for.” These also used quarantine as a form of preventive medicine.

Women, the source of future warriors, enjoyed excellent preventative medicine during pregnancy and labor. Children were cared for by the *atlan tlachixqui*, an

Aztec pediatrician. These had a curious method of diagnosis that involved observing the reflection of the child’s face in a basin of water. Indeed, shamans would diagnose illnesses using the intervention of sacred objects, trying to expel the evil spirits thought to be a cause of sickness.

## Medicinal Plants

The Aztec are likewise notable for their encyclopedic knowledge of medicinal plants. Curative herbs and remedies were known to be distributed in “pharmacies where prepared syrups, ointments and dressings could be bought.” The

*papiani-panamacani* who worked in these establishments not only sold the medicines but also used their experience to advise their customers.

One remedy in high demand was an antidote against snakebites, crucial given that Mexico has a huge variety of venomous snakes. The Aztec made their remedy with tobacco and maguey, and the Spanish themselves testified to its effectiveness. Another popular herbal remedy was the *cacaloxochitl* plant, highly esteemed for its antistress properties. This was especially popular among the Aztec ruling elite, who used it in the form of aromatherapy, while enjoying a massage in a *temazcal*, or steam bath.

## Smart Sanitation

A relatively high standard of public and private hygiene was another decisive factor in Aztec longevity. Thanks to the writings of the conquistadores Hernán

The *tetonaltih* specialized in illnesses of the spirit, whose workings were attributed to the goddess Tlazoltéotl.

GODDESS TLAZOLTÉOTL, HUASTECA PERIOD (900-1521)



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FOR A STIFF NECK, the Aztec prescribed bathing and pressure applied to the neck. In serious cases, a poultice of plants was used, along with a drink of water mixed with *coaxtuil*.



INFUSIONS WOULD BE RECOMMENDED for patients with feverish symptoms. They would also use infusions to cure or soothe other afflictions like insomnia or stomach cramps.



IN CASES OF PATIENTS SUFFERING CHEST PAINS following a blow to that area of the body, “they would drink still warm urine, mixed with the ground bodies of three or four lizards.”



FOR THE “BUBO” AFFLICTION —syphilis—water was mixed with the herb *tietlemaitl* and powdered *tialquequétzal* or copper filings. The patient was then placed in a *temascal* (steam bath).

IMAGES: ART ARCHIVE

Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, we not only have in-depth understanding of the merits of Aztec medicine but also of their hygiene habits. These were markedly better than those of contemporary Europeans.

The order and cleanliness of Tenochtitlan stood in stark contrast to the filth of the Spaniards’ home cities. For example, the Aztec capital boasted an excellent system for distributing drinking water, with not one, but two sets of pipes. While one set of pipes was in use, the other was being maintained so as to keep both in a constant state of cleanliness. This included the innovative use of *axolotls*, ten-inch-long amphibians, which were placed in the pipe and would eat any impurities, leaving the water clean. When Hernán Cortés surrounded and besieged Tenochtitlan, he broke the water pipes to deprive the citizens of running water. When the city was rebuilt after the conquest, only

one of these sets of pipes was repaired. As a result, waterborne illnesses spread through the population with an unprecedented severity.

The palaces of Tenochtitlan were constructed with private latrines connected to a system of running water. The public also had access to toilet facilities, which were distributed throughout the city and even along the roads leading to it. The Aztec had developed the habit of recycling their organic waste, which was either taken out of the city in containers to be burned, or spread on the surrounding fields as manure.

Houses were built according to standardized ventilation regulations and might be equipped with steam baths. Such concern for cleanliness not only dominated civic culture but also informed every stage of Aztec life across the whole of society. Citizens were accustomed to taking baths every day and

using soap made from the fruit of the *copalxocotl*. From their earliest years Aztec children were taught the importance of personal grooming, including attention to their teeth and their clothes. Young couples were instructed that personal and household cleanliness would lead not only to a long union but also to a very happy one. ■

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### Learn more

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