

Public Health a Century Ago – A Snapshot

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Historical disease patterns show a shift from infectious illnesses to chronic diseases. Conditions like heart disease, cancer, and autoimmune disorders have become increasingly prevalent in modern times
- Despite longer lifespans from medical advances, the quality of life has declined as modern medicine focuses on managing symptoms rather than addressing the root causes of chronic disease
- Past generations maintained physical resilience through daily manual labor and movement, whereas modern sedentary lifestyles have contributed to earlier onset of mobility issues and frailty
- Traditional diets consisted of fresh, unprocessed, seasonal foods from local sources, without artificial additives or preservatives; foods provided complete nutrition through whole ingredients and traditional preparation methods
- Reclaiming health requires rejecting modern habits that prioritize convenience at the cost of your health and returning to fundamental principles – nutrient-dense food, regular movement, and minimizing exposure to environmental toxins

Health today looks very different from what it did a few generations ago. If you compare modern health trends with historical records, you'll find that many chronic illnesses that define modern life were uncommon in the past.

People may not have lived as long on average, but those who survived infectious diseases tended to stay strong and independent well into old age. Their bodies didn't break down the way many do now. The question is, why?

Many assume that because medical technology has advanced, people today are healthier than ever. In reality, the rise of modern medicine has not prevented the explosion of chronic disease. Instead, it has created a system that manages symptoms rather than addressing the root causes.

Understanding what worked for past generations provides answers for solving today's health problems. By looking at disease patterns, physical resilience, and traditional diets, you'll start to see what went wrong — and more importantly, what you can do to fix it.

Disease Patterns of the Past

At the turn of the 20th century, the biggest threats to public health weren't chronic diseases but acute infections. According to mortality data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),¹ a total of 343,217 people died from all causes in the 1900, and the leading killers were pneumonia, influenza, tuberculosis, and diarrheal diseases, which claimed tens of thousands of lives each year.

- **Respiratory and diarrheal infections caused the most deaths** — Pneumonia and influenza alone accounted for 40,362 deaths, making them the deadliest infections at the time. Tuberculosis followed closely behind, claiming 38,820 lives. Diarrheal diseases, which were particularly dangerous for infants and young children due to poor sanitation and lack of clean drinking water, caused another 28,491 deaths.²

These conditions were widespread public health crises that shaped early medical advancements in sanitation, hygiene, and disease prevention. By comparison, the diseases that dominate today's mortality statistics were far less common.

- **Heart disease and cancer were rare** — Heart disease, which is now the leading cause of death in the U.S. and globally,³ was responsible for only 27,427 deaths in 1900, with a mortality rate of 138 per 100,000 people. Cancer was even lower on the list, causing just 12,769 deaths. Diabetes, which now affects millions, wasn't even listed among the leading causes of death during that time.⁴
- **Medical advances reduced infectious disease deaths, but chronic illnesses rose** — By the mid-20th century, infectious disease deaths had declined sharply due to advances in sanitation and medical care. However, while medical advancements have helped people survive infections, they haven't prevented the steady decline in metabolic and physical health. As deaths from infections dropped, chronic conditions took their place.
- **Heart disease and cancer became leading causes of death by the late 20th century** — Diabetes was first included in the list of leading death causes in 1922,⁵ while heart disease overtook infectious diseases as the leading cause of death in 1921, and has remained at the lead since.⁶

By 1998, heart disease was responsible for 724,859 annual deaths. Cancer followed closely with 541,532 deaths and stroke claimed another 158,448 lives. Chronic respiratory diseases accounted for 112,584 deaths and diabetes contributed to 64,751 deaths.⁷

- **Autoimmune disease rates have risen significantly in recent decades** — These diseases, which were almost nonexistent in early mortality records, have also surged, with cases increasing 3% to 12% annually.⁸

Research from 2011 to 2022 found that over 15 million Americans, or roughly 4.6% of the population, had been diagnosed with at least one autoimmune disease. Even more concerning, 34% of those diagnosed had two or more autoimmune conditions.⁹

The significant shift in disease trends reflects the way living has transformed over time. While modern medicine has extended lifespans, it hasn't necessarily improved quality of life. Unlike many people today, our ancestors didn't need to rely on a dozen prescriptions just to function. Their bodies worked the way they were supposed to because their lifestyles naturally supported their metabolic health — that's the real difference between then and now.

Strength and Resilience Were Built Into Daily Life

A century ago, movement wasn't optional — it was part of everyday living. Most jobs required manual labor, whether it was farming, construction, or metalworking. Even household tasks demanded strength, from gathering food and hauling water to chopping wood. Walking long distances was also common and people relied on their own bodies to get things done. Now, most people live in a completely different reality.^{10,11}

- **Modern life is largely sedentary due to technological conveniences** — From morning to night, most routines require minimal movement, leaving the average person sedentary for most of the day. Jobs that require physical effort are less common and modern conveniences have eliminated the need for even basic movement.

Elevators replaced stairs, cars replaced walking, and machines handle tasks that once required human strength. This lack of daily movement has led to reduced strength and mobility, and a higher risk of both illness and injury.¹²

- **Children in past generations also developed physical resilience early in life** — They spent most of their time outdoors, climbing trees, running, and engaging in physically demanding play that built strength, coordination, and endurance. Their daily routines involved walking to school, helping with chores, and participating in unstructured physical activities that kept them naturally fit.

- **Today's children are more sedentary, which harms their long-term health** — In contrast, many children nowadays spend most of their time sitting, whether in classrooms or glued to screens, resulting in weaker muscles, poor posture, and a growing risk of obesity and metabolic disorders at a young age. What's worse, losing the natural physical activity of childhood impacts their current health and sets them up for long-term physical decline.^{13,14,15}
- **Older adults in the past remained physically independent longer** — One of the biggest differences between past generations and today is how long people stay physically functional.

In the early 1900s, it wasn't unusual to see older adults still working, walking long distances, or maintaining physical independence well into their later years.¹⁶ Even without modern medicine, many remained active and independent because their bodies were used to movement from an early age.¹⁷

- **Modern physical decline often begins early due to inactivity** — In contrast, many people today start experiencing joint pain, muscle weakness, and mobility issues well before they enter old age.¹⁸ When your body isn't used the way it was designed to, it starts breaking down. Muscles shrink, bones become brittle, and metabolic function slows down.¹⁹
- **Basic functional movements are now difficult for many people** — Many people now struggle with movements like squatting, lifting, or standing for long periods.²⁰ Unlike today's exercise routines, which often isolate muscles with repetitive motions, past generations used their entire bodies in natural, practical ways that kept them balanced and injury-free.

If you want to rebuild your physical resilience, it's essential to incorporate more movement in your everyday routine, not just for the sake of exercise, but as part of daily life. The reason past generations didn't worry about "getting fit" is because they lived in a way that kept them strong. The good news is that this same approach still works today.

Food Used To Be Simple and Real – And That's Why It Worked

Our diets have also undergone dramatic changes. There was a time when food didn't come in packages filled with ingredients you can't pronounce. Instead, meals were made from fresh, minimally processed ingredients. People ate what they grew, raised, or bought fresh from local markets, and every meal was prepared from scratch.

- **Foods were nutrient-rich and naturally raised** — Fruits and vegetables came straight from home gardens, thriving in nutrient-rich soil that enhanced their flavor and vitamin content. Dairy and meat were sourced from pasture-raised animals that roamed freely and ate the diets they were meant to eat. Natural fats like butter, lard, and tallow were the foundation of home cooking rather than wrongly blamed for heart disease.
- **These whole foods provided our ancestors with essential nutrients in their most bioavailable form** — They were not fortified or artificially enriched because real food didn't — and still doesn't — need to be. There were also no artificial flavors, chemical preservatives, or synthetic additives.^{21,22}

Instead, food was prepared in ways that enhanced both nutrition and taste. Fresh carrots provided natural sweetness, grass fed butter added richness, and slow-simmered bone broth delivered deep, satisfying umami.

- **Traditional diets included raw dairy and nose-to-tail meat consumption** — Dairy was enjoyed fresh and raw, complete with its natural enzymes and beneficial bacteria that supported digestion and immunity.²³

Meats were consumed nose-to-tail, honoring the whole animal and providing a full spectrum of nutrients from organ meats, connective tissues, and bone broths. This ancestral wisdom ensured that nothing went to waste and that the body received the complete range of nutrients it needed to thrive.²⁴

- **Eating followed the natural seasons** — People ate what was available locally, cycling through different foods throughout the year. Crops grew at their own pace and reached peak nutritional value when they were ready for harvest. There were no artificial growing techniques, synthetic fertilizers, or genetic modifications forcing them to mature faster than nature intended.²⁵ This natural cycling of foods provided exactly what the body needed in each season.
- **Traditional food cultures also understood that real food was more than just sustenance** — It has therapeutic properties that supported health and strengthened connections within families and communities. Meals were a time for gathering, and cooking skills were passed down through generations, along with the understanding that good food was fundamental to good health.
- **Food was spiritually and physically nourishing, not just a product** — Every culture had its own healing foods and recipes that were built on time-tested ways of nourishing both the body and the soul. There was also a deeper awareness of where food came from because people had a hand in growing, raising, or preparing it.

This direct connection to food sources provided both physical and spiritual nourishment. Food was not a mass-produced commodity but something deeply tied to survival and well-being.

- **Simple, whole foods remain the best path to nourishment** — The lesson to be learned here is that food doesn't need to be complicated to be nourishing. In fact, the opposite is often true. The body thrives on whole, unprocessed foods that are prepared properly, eaten in balance, and consumed in their most natural state.

The simplest ingredients have been the backbone of human diets for millennia. They fueled strong, resilient individuals long before processed alternatives existed, and they remain the best foundation for health today. By returning to these basics, you will experience the kind of nourishment that modern food systems have largely stripped away.

Reclaiming the Quality of Health That Was Once Normal

The stark contrast between past and present health trends reveals a simple truth — your body is built to thrive under the right conditions. It needs real, nutrient-dense food, regular movement, and an environment free from harmful chemicals.

- **Health depends on efficient energy production** — When these foundational elements are in place, your body produces energy efficiently, keeping you strong, resilient, and free from disease. When they are stripped away, mitochondrial function declines, energy production falters, and chronic illness takes hold.
- **Modern life has introduced biologically incompatible stressors** — Modern conveniences have made life easier in many ways, but they have also led to a diet dominated by processed foods, a lifestyle that promotes inactivity, and an environment filled with toxins.

These changes disrupt metabolism and have contributed to the epidemic of chronic disease. To reverse this trend, you need to eliminate the factors that didn't exist in past generations but are now undermining health at the cellular level.

- **Restoring health requires understanding the root causes** — Reclaiming health starts with understanding what went wrong and making deliberate changes to correct it. That means reintroducing ancestral habits that support mitochondrial function rather than relying on a system designed to manage the symptoms of illness rather than prevent it.

The goal is not to return to the past, but to take what worked and apply it in a way that supports health in today's world. By making small but meaningful adjustments, you'll be able to restore your body's energy production and rebuild the strength and resilience that used to be the norm.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Health in the Past and Today

Q: Why do so many people today suffer from chronic diseases?

A: Chronic diseases have skyrocketed because modern life strips away the natural habits that once supported health. Sedentary lifestyles, processed foods, environmental toxins, and overreliance on symptom-based medicine all play a role. The focus has shifted from prevention and vitality to pharmaceutical management of disease.

Q: Were people in the past actually healthier?

A: Yes, in many ways. Although they faced high mortality from infectious diseases, those who survived into adulthood often remained strong, independent, and functional into old age. They didn't rely on multiple prescriptions just to get through the day, and their lifestyles naturally supported long-term health.

Q: What role has modern medicine played in the shift in public health?

A: Modern medicine helped reduce deaths from infections but failed to prevent the chronic disease epidemic. It treats symptoms instead of addressing the root causes. Lifespan may have increased, but the quality of life has declined.

Q: What made ancestral diets so nourishing and effective for long-term health?

A: Ancestral diets were built on fresh, unprocessed foods that delivered real nutrition. People ate what they grew, raised, or got from nearby farms. Meals included raw dairy, organ meats, bone broth, and seasonal produce — no additives or vegetable oils. This diet supported digestion, immunity, and long-term health because it was real, complete, and deeply nourishing.

Q: Is it possible to restore the level of health people used to enjoy?

A: Yes, but it requires a shift in how you live. That means eating real food, moving throughout the day, and reducing exposure to modern stressors. When you rebuild the habits that support mitochondrial function, your body regains the energy and resilience that used to be normal.

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