Smallpox and the Immune System

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Illustration of a hospital with two horse-drawn ambulances approaching.

Renwick Smallpox Hospital, 1875 New York City

Smallpox was a serious infectious disease caused by a virus.

Illustration of nurses tending to a ward full of patients. One nurse carries a bouquet of roses.

Scientists and historians believe smallpox has been around for thousands of years.

Over all those years, this virus caused millions of deaths.

Illustration of a bedridden patient with pustules on her face.

Look Christine!

Illustration of the patient watching as the nurse puts the flowers in a pitcher of water on the windowsill.

Your mother sent you flowers to cheer you up!

Illustration of the flowers in the pitcher.

Aren’t they beautiful?

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Illustration of a boy holding a flower.

A flower for the most beautiful woman on the Lower East Side.

Illustration of a woman holding the flower as the boy runs off. She is standing in front of a greengrocery and its proprietor.

You don’t stand a chance with Miss Byrne, Bobby! Oh... that boy!

Illustration of the street in front of the greengrocery, which has an awning that reads Conti Greengrocery, and the woman chatting with the greengrocer.

You shouldn’t get Bobby’s hopes up. He is very impulsive.

But Mr. Conti, I didn’t do anything. I was just kind to him.

Oh! I will have a serious talk with him.

Illustration of the greengrocer holding a pumpkin and coughing respiratory droplets.

Don’t think I forgot. Cof! Cof! Here you have the best pumpkin on the market!

Illustration of a woman leaning over to smell the pumpkin.

Smell it! I can already taste that delicious pumpkin pie that you make!

The virus can spread from one person to another through saliva droplets in the air.
Sometime I’ll bring you a freshly baked one.

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During the 1800s, the country went through a period of change and economic growth.

Millions of people migrated from Europe. Many new immigrants who came to New York lived in crowded housing on the Lower East Side.

While anyone, anywhere, could catch smallpox, the crowded conditions meant that the illness could spread faster.

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Someone infected with smallpox might not show symptoms for up to 17 days.

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Two weeks later...

A high fever, chills, and headache are the first signs of trouble.

Large, fluid-filled bumps called pustules develop in the mouth first. This is how the virus gets into droplets of air when someone coughs.

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[Toc Toc]
Anne? Are you there? You haven’t been to the store in days. Are you okay?

Go away, Susan! I’m sick...

You should go to the doctor.

As the virus spreads, pustules cover the body.

Do you want me to call Doctor Brown?

Anne?

Anne!

Answer me!

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Doctor Brown will see you in a minute to discharge you. Congratulations!

Most people with smallpox recovered.

But....

We need to hurry. Many people are waiting for these beds to become available.

About 3 out of every 10 people with the disease died.

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Many smallpox survivors have permanent scars over large areas of their body, especially their faces.

Mom! What happened to her?

Don’t point!

Many smallpox survivors have permanent scars over large areas of their body, especially their faces.
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What can I do for you, miss?

I’m so sorry for your loss.

Thank you, I can’t believe he is gone. This is a terrible sickness. You were lucky!

Mr. Conti loved my pumpkin pie recipe.

I promised to bring him one.

You’re very kind. This will sweeten so much sadness.

Yes, many survivors have permanent scars. The price of survival.

But nothing softens the scars deep in the heart.

The end.