



Day 5 Age of Exploration Unit
49-109 Minutes

Obstacles: Disease

(Adaptable for Grades 3–9)

TITLE:

Understanding Scurvy and Other Dangerous Diseases on Long Voyages

OBJECTIVE:

Students will learn what scurvy is, why sailors suffered from it, how it affected crews, how it could be cured, and what other diseases were common on long voyages. Students will analyze symptoms, explore causes, and connect these hardships to the challenges of world exploration.

GRADE LEVEL:

Adaptable for Grades 3–9

MATERIALS:

- Printed or digital copies of the article and printables
- Projector or screen

1. INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

Teacher Says:

“Today we’re learning about scurvy and other diseases that sailors struggled with during the Age of Exploration. These illnesses were just as dangerous as storms, sea monsters, and shipwrecks.”

Define the following vocabulary briefly:

- Scurvy
- Vitamin C
- Dysentery
- Typhus
- Beriberi

Ask students:

“Why would sailors on long voyages have trouble staying healthy?”

(Expect answers about limited food, no refrigeration, cramped spaces, dirty water, germs, spoiled food.)

2. ARTICLE READING (7 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/legends-myths-and-destinations/scurvy-an-age-of-exploration-horror-tale>

Choose an option:

- Teacher reads aloud
- Students read independently
- Younger grades read simplified version; older grades read full version

Quick Check Question:

“Why did it take so long for people to realize that scurvy came from a lack of Vitamin C?”

(Expect answers about weak scientific knowledge, old beliefs about “bad air,” and lack of medical tools.)

3. Discussion Questions (12 min)

1. “Why did sailors get scurvy so easily?”

Possible answers:

- No fresh fruits or vegetables
- Food spoiled quickly
- sailors ate dry biscuits, salted meat, and grains
- Vitamin C was not yet understood

2. “Which symptoms of scurvy sounded the worst to you? Why?”

Possible answers:

- Swollen gums
- Loose or lost teeth
- Sores that would not heal
- Weakness and confusion
- Organ failure

3. “What other diseases made life at sea dangerous?”

Possible answers:

- Dysentery from dirty water
- Typhus from lice
- Beriberi from malnutrition
- Pneumonia and tuberculosis from damp, crowded ship living
- Fevers that spread quickly

4. “What does this teach us about daily life on an exploring ship?”

Possible answers:

- It was extremely hard and uncomfortable
- People didn’t understand germs
- Medical knowledge was very limited
- Even healthy sailors could become sick quickly
- Disease could kill more sailors than battles or storms

(Grades 3–5: focus on symptoms and why food spoils.)

(Grades 6–9: discuss nutrition, germs, scientific discovery, and long-term impact.)

4. The Sick Ship (15 minutes)

This printable activity explains common diseases that sailors contracted such as scurvy, yellow fever, cholera, typhoid, and others. It then requires students to play the role of a ship doctor and to diagnose sick sailors based on their symptoms. Students will enjoy this activity.

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/legends-myths-and-destinations/the-sick-ship-diagnosing-sailors-in-the-age-of-exploration>

5. Optional Creative Outlet: The Gourmet Galleon (30 minutes) Super Fun!

In this creative writing and history activity, students design their own Age of Exploration “sailor menu,” choosing historically accurate foods like hardtack and salt beef plus setting prices and descriptions. An alliteration helper encourages them to craft playful, descriptive entree names (like “Rancid Rats” or “Salty Sawdust Stew”) while they customize fonts, colors, and cover icons. When finished, they can print a full menu with a bold cover and optional customer reviews page that showcase both their content knowledge and language skills.

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/the-gourmet-galleon>

6. Optional Literacy Enrichment (20 minutes)

Scurvy Printable or Online Reading Comprehension: Lexile Apx. 1000 | Word Count: 214

Online:

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorer-activities/scurvy-online-reading-comprehension>

Printable:

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorer-activities/scurvy-printable-reading-comprehension>

Optional Writing Prompt (20 minutes)

Scurvy - A Simple, but Elusive Explanation

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/explorers-and-the-age-of-exploration/explorers-writing-activities/scurvy-a-simple-but-elusive-explanation>

By some account, millions of sailors died of scurvy during the Age of Exploration. At the time, the accepted explanation was that sailors contracted the horrendous condition from breathing in the evil vapors of swamps. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that scientists determined that scurvy was caused by a lack of Vitamin-C over time. A simple squeeze of a lemon into the mouth would reverse even advanced cases.

Fast forward to modern times. Think of something or some things that we currently have no explanation for or cannot explain adequately that you think people in the future will figure out. It could be one of the secrets of the universe, the pathology of certain diseases, or ways in which the human mind works. Write about it in detail below and hypothesize how future humans will find the answers.

Allow students to share their responses.

CLOSING (2 minutes)

Teacher reviews:

- Scurvy was caused by a lack of Vitamin C, not "bad air"
- Many diseases at sea came from spoiled food, dirty water, and close living quarters

- Sailors faced more danger from sickness than from storms or sea battles
- Students learned how to read about, analyze, and creatively respond to real historical hardships
