

Milk Sickness



by Curtis W. Wood, 2006 of Flickr user Zen Sutherland. [2]

Milk sickness appeared annually from July until the onset of winter. In especially hot, dry summers, some communities lost one-quarter to one-half of their inhabitants. Settlers soon learned to recognize signs of the ailment in their cattle, a general weakness known as the "trembles," especially noticeable after the animals had run for a few minutes. Similar symptoms of weakness, accompanied by nausea, vomiting, and constipation afflicted humans. Death occurred in two to ten days. The victim might recover only to relapse and die after exertion or survive but remain weakened for months or years.

By the 1820s researchers had identified a connection between cattle that were allowed to run freely in the woods and the increased frequency of milk sickness and noted that cultivated pastures virtually eliminated it. In 1828 an Illinois woman, [Anna Pierce](#) ^[6], correctly identified the cause of the sickness with the advice of a Shawnee woman, but her discovery remained little known. In 1840 Drake argued to a wider audience that herbivorous animals got milk sickness by eating an unidentified plant and then transmitted it to humans through the consumption of meat, milk, and butter. Unfortunately, he incorrectly identified poison oak and poison ivy as the culprits. It was not until 1906 that white snakeroot and rayless goldenrod were proved to be the sources of the toxin. Gradually, improved knowledge of the causes led to an abatement of the illness.

"Deadly Milk Sickness," *Greensboro Patriot*, 25 Nov. 1903.

David Cameron Duffy, "Land of Milk and Poison," *Natural History* 99 (July 1990).

Reida E. Niederhofer, "The Milk Sickness: Drake on Medical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 254 (October 1985).

The Kentucky Encyclopedia, Milk Sickness [7]

National Park Service, Milk Sickness: <https://www.nps.gov/libo/historyculture/milk-sickness.htm> [3]

The "Slows": the torment of Milk Sickness on the Midwestern Frontier, Walter J. Daly <http://www.istor.org/stable/10.2307/27792690> [8]

White Snake Root, Asheville, NC. Image courtesy of Flickr user Zen Sutherland. Available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/zen/5033006966/> [2] (accessed July 11, 2012).

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Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.[16]

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