

# Mission and the Spread of Disease

Disease affected every California mission community. When the Spanish arrived in California, they exposed the California Native Americans to very serious illnesses such as smallpox, pneumonia, tuberculosis, syphilis, and measles. Native Americans could not endure these diseases. Their bodies, or immune systems, never had the chance to develop resistance to them. Because of their weak immune system, disease spread fast through the mission communities, and as a result, many Native Americans died.



Tight living quarters may have been the cause of hundreds of people dying every year. One of the worst epidemics was during 1806-1810. During those four years, one out of four Native Americans in the San Francisco Bay area died of disease.

The padres did what they could for the sick, and after serious epidemics, hospitals were constructed. Padres did not have medicine like we do today. They simply did what they could. Padres and Native American nurses must have felt overwhelmed at times trying to care for the mission's sick people.

Neither the padres, nor the Native Americans understood the science behind illness. They did not understand how sickness spread, or if people were contagious, therefore living quarters became the breeding ground for diseases. For instance, all unmarried women lived inside the monjerio, or a dormitory. Often times, the women living within the monjerio got sick because it was crowded, damp, and unsanitary. One sick woman could spread disease rapidly to everyone else.



Disease was harmful to the population of Native Americans in California. It is estimated that the Native American population was around 300,000 when the Spanish arrived, and because of new disease, their population declined rapidly to about 30,000 by 1850. Nevertheless, descendants of Native Californians still live today, and continue the traditions of the people before them.



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