

# Raising Children in the Early 17th Century: Demographics

---

Average life expectancy at birth for English people in the late 16th and early 17th centuries was just under 40 – 39.7 years. However, this low figure was mostly due to the high rate of infant and child mortality; over 12% of all children born would die in their first year. A man or woman who reached the age of 30 could expect to live to 59. Life expectancy in New England was much higher, where the average man lived to his mid-sixties and women lived on average to 62.

Demographers estimate that approximately 2% of all live births in England at this time would die in the first day of life. By the end of the first week, a cumulative total of 5% would die. Another 3 or 4% would die within the month. A total of 12 or 13% would die within their first year. With the hazards of infancy behind them, the death rate for children slowed but continued to occur. A cumulative total of 36% of children died before the age of six, and another 24% between the ages of seven and sixteen. In all, of 100 live births, 60 would die before the age of 16.

## Family Size

An English woman who married at the average age of 23 ½ could expect a reproductive span of about 20 years. In New England, where women typically married at 20 or 21, the potential years for giving birth increased by those two or three years. The typical English woman would give birth six or seven times. The average number of children born to a New England couple was slightly over eight. While this difference is not striking, the difference lay in the number of children who survived to adulthood. In 17th-century England, the average household size was 4.75 persons. In New England, an average of 7-8 children reached 21.

Besides the slightly earlier age of marriage, the chief causes of this increase in family size in New England seems to have been the unpolluted water, and uncrowded conditions, which in turn led to a decrease in the severity of outbreaks of disease. In the 17th century, people relieved themselves in chamber pots, privies, or outdoors. Much of this human waste ended up in the local water supply, particularly in cities and towns, and contributed heavily to the spread of disease.

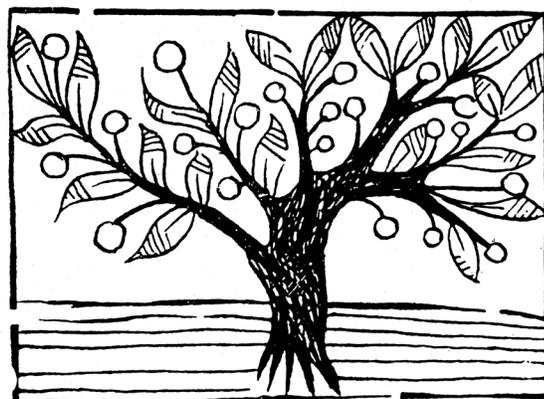
## Causes of Death:

Seventeenth-century medical writers concentrated on what are today considered symptoms, rather than diseases now recognized. This makes it impossible to directly correlate the two. Therefore some conclusions must remain speculative. The following is a combination of what period sources reported and modern explanations.

## Death in infancy:

One of the leading causes of death in children in the London bills of mortality is “Chrisomes and infants” meaning the death of a child under a month (chrisom) or before it could speak (infant). These are obviously not causes of death. Modern experts theorize that newborns were likely to die of birth trauma, including tetanus, caused by the use of an unsterilized knife or pair of scissors to cut the umbilical cord; prematurity or low birth weight; or an inherited birth defect. Other typical period causes of death were convulsions or fits, breeding teeth, thrush and worms. Modern medical opinion attributes the convulsions to fever or in some cases caused by diarrhea, which led to an abnormally high concentration of sodium in the blood, in turn causing seizures.

About seven months of age, children began “breeding teeth” referring to the belief that teeth developed shortly before breaking through the gum. This was listed as the cause of death for 5% of London infants. Modern medical authorities attribute these deaths to concurrent disease, such as infection and gangrene.



A collaboration between PLIMOTH PLANTATION™ and the  
NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY®  
supported by the INSTITUTE FOR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES

*www.PlymouthAncestors.org*

PLYMOUTH ANCESTORS

## Raising Children in the Early 17th Century: Demographics

---

Thrush is a fairly common fungal infection, now controlled easily by medication. It was a minor cause of death in the 17th century.

Worms are parasites which generally live in balance with the host. In the 17th century, worms, and lice as well, were seen as a positive force, cleansing the body of corruption. Problems occurred when the infestation was severe, leading to “pains, consumptions, epilepsies, frensies and divers other mischiefs.” Worms were considered one of the three great diseases of childhood and were occasionally given as the cause of death.

### **Death in childhood:**

The following diseases, while affecting all ages, were common causes of death in childhood. Whooping cough, diphtheria, dysentery, tuberculosis, typhus, typhoid fever, rickets, chicken pox, measles, scarlet fever, smallpox and plague under their period names, were all listed as causes of death in children.

Relatively few deaths were caused by accidents. The most common of these was drowning. Small children fell into laundry tubs, or played too close to ditches, ponds and wells. Older children died while playing near water, swimming or bathing, or while working. Both boys and girls living near the shore gathered shellfish and were swept in by waves. Boys drowned while fishing or gathering reeds. Older girls slipped into pits, ditches or ponds while drawing water. Burning was a less common cause of death, although babies left in cradles near the fire or unsupervised toddlers were at risk. Finally, children were occasionally killed by being run over by a cart or horse, or hit by a falling object.



A collaboration between PLIMOTH PLANTATION™ and the  
NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY®  
supported by the INSTITUTE FOR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES

*www.PlymouthAncestors.org*

PLYMOUTH ANCESTORS