Dramatic effects of control measures on deaths from yellow fever in Havana, Cuba, in the early 1900s.

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Abstract

Yellow fever, named as such due to the jaundice it may cause in an infected person, is a tropical, vector-borne disease, endemic in certain areas of Africa and the Americas (WHO 2014). Records suggest that yellow fever in the Americas occurred on the Yucatan peninsula as far back as 1648 (CDC 2010).

During the early years of yellow fever epidemics in the Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries, European armies suffered greatly from outbreaks. For example, the British army lost 20,000 out of 27,000 men in Cartagena, Colombia in 1741, and the French army lost 8,000 men in Santo Domingo in 1803 (Brês 1986). One of the most significant epidemics occurred in Panama in the late 19th century, when yellow fever and malaria struck French workers constructing the Panama Canal. The project cost thousands of lives lost to yellow fever and malaria, and millions of dollars, contributing, with corruption and political scandal, to bankrupting the French company constructing the Canal (US Dept. of State No Date; Skinner 1988).