

# GET SICK

by James Introcaso

There's only one time it's fun to get sick - game time. Tabletop roleplaying games have an established tradition of giving player characters nasty, wonderful illnesses. Unfortunately, the fifth-edition core rulebooks have little in the way of disease design guidelines or sample illnesses. This article provides guidance for creating your own diseases and examples to use in your game.

## CREATING YOUR OWN DISEASES

First, decide if the illness you are creating is mundane or supernatural. This choice will inform the disease's three components - transmission method, symptoms, and cure. Mundane components mimic those we find in the real world and supernatural components are the kind that can only happen in a fantasy game. A supernatural disease can have mundane components, but must have at least one supernatural component.

A transmission method is the way a disease infects creatures. Mundane diseases can be airborne, foodborne, contact, and intimate. Contact diseases are spread by interacting with other creatures via skin to skin contact and intimate diseases require more than

a handshake (like drinking from the same glass or kissing). Supernatural transmission methods include spells, attacks of certain monsters, alchemical products, and exposure to foreign planes.

When a creature is exposed to a disease's transmission method, it is allowed a saving throw to resist being infected. Most diseases require a Constitution saving throw, but some supernatural diseases which affect the mind could require an Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma saving throw. Marginally contagious diseases require a DC 10-11 save, moderately contagious diseases require DC 12-15, and highly contagious diseases require DC 16-20. If a disease has a transmission method which guarantees a lot of exposure, such as airborne, consider giving its saving throw a lower DC so all your PCs don't take a week off from adventuring to fight the flu instead of orcs.

Note any specific creatures who might be immune to the disease. Immunity could be random and unexplained in very rare cases. In areas where a disease is most prevalent, some creatures have developed an immunity over the ages, while others carry the disease, but never experience its ill effects.

Part of a disease's transmission method is an incubation period. Most diseases need time to infect a target before symptoms appear, usually a few hours to a few weeks. Keep incubation periods shorter than a month, otherwise you might forget a PC is infected.

Most diseases have multiple symptoms which increase in severity if untreated. Mundane diseases have typical symptoms like coughing, sneezing, and vomiting while supernatural diseases have otherworldly symptoms like limbs turning into jelly or growing tentacles. Assign symptoms a mechanical effect. A disease which causes a creature to vomit uncontrollably imposes levels of exhaustion, representing the creature's growing dehydration. Mechanical effects for diseases include increased exhaustion levels, reduced hit point recovery, penalties to attack rolls, saving throws, ability checks, and AC, conditions, slowed movement, spell effects, and madness. Some diseases have deceptive symptoms at first which actually give creatures a mechanical bonus before imposing a penalty.

Think about the disease's end effect when creating symptoms. Death, indefinite madness, a permanent condition such as blindness, or transforming into another creature entirely could be the final result of an illness. Let that end effect inform the disease's symptoms. For instance a supernatural disease which transforms a creature into an ooze might first reduce the creature's movement and penalize its Dexterity saving throws as it becomes more lethargic and ooze-like.

Most diseases play out in a series of saving throws. With every success the symptoms get better, but with every failure they worsen. To encourage teamwork and camaraderie, a GM may grant a PC advantage on a saving throw if one of their allies succeeds on a DC 15 Wisdom (Medicine) check to care for the

infected character during a long rest.

Diseases sometimes have another cure beyond this series of saving throws. Spells, alchemical treatments, environmental cures (like bathing in a specific spring), special creatures (the touch of an angel), or a combination of these could cure disease even after a creature has entered the disease's end state.

## SAMPLE DISEASES

### **Bottle Fever** - Mundane Disease

Drinking putrid ale, wine, or liquor can mean more than a hangover. Creatures who catch bottle fever feel drunk even when they haven't had any alcohol, because the yeast from a previous bad drink sticks to the walls of their stomachs and continues to ferment.

A creature who drinks rancid alcohol must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw or contract bottle fever. The first symptoms of bottle fever begin to show in 1d10 hours. An infected creature gives off a strong alcoholic odor. When the creature performs a physically exerting act, like climbing a wall or fighting, it must succeed a DC 10 Constitution saving throw or become poisoned for 1 hour. If the creature succeeds on the saving throw, it does not need to make another saving throw for this effect for 1 hour.

At the end of each long rest, an infected creature must make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw. If the creature fails three of these saving throws, the yeast become embedded in its stomach and the disease can only be cured by drinking a potion of supreme healing. If the creature succeeds on three of these saving throws, the disease is cured.

### **Demonic Plague** - Supernatural Disease

Yellow-green plague shrubs grow in the Abyss. The plants are harmless to demons, but when their spores are inhaled by a non-

demon, a piece of the Abyss is planted in the victim's body. Demons have been known to craft spore bombs to spread chaos amongst enemies, even among devils.

Creatures who breathe in the spores must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or contract demonic plague. Within 1d4 hours of contracting the disease an infected creature grows physically stronger, but begins to lose its mind. The creature's Strength score is raised to 19 unless it already has a higher score and it gains advantage on all Strength checks and saving throws. The creature's Intelligence score drops 1d6 points. The creature's Intelligence score cannot fall below 2 as a result of this disease.

At the end of each long rest, an infected creature must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the creature's Intelligence score is decreased by 1d6 points. If the creature's Intelligence score falls to 2, it desires only to kill and eat creatures of its type and only a greater restoration spell cast by a celestial or fiend can cure the creature. If the creature is a PC the GM takes control of the character until it is cured. On a successful save, the creature regains 1 point of Intelligence. If the creature's Intelligence score returns to normal the disease is cured.

### **Itching Insides** - Mundane Disease

Itching insides is a respiratory disease surface-dwelling creatures can catch in damp underground areas or by coming into contact with another creature infected with the disease. Creatures who normally live underground, like drow and dwarves, are immune to itching insides.

A surface-dwelling creature who has spent a continuous week in a damp underground area or who has come within 10 feet of an infected creature must succeed a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or contract itching insides. The first symptoms, coughing and

feeling itchy inside the lungs, appear in 1d4 days. As the disease progresses, an infected creature begins to cough up a black mucus and the itching in its lungs turn to burning. The creature gains one level of exhaustion and whenever it performs a physically exerting act, like casting a spell or taking the Dash action, it must succeed a DC 11 Constitution saving throw or fall prone as it is overwhelmed by shooting pain in its lungs.

At the end of each long rest, an infected creature must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the creature gains one level of exhaustion and the DC to save against falling prone from pain during physical exertion increases by 1. On a successful save, the creature's exhaustion decreases by one level and the DC to save against falling prone from pain during physical exertion decreases by 1. If a successful saving throw reduces the infected creature's level of exhaustion below 1, the disease is cured.

### **Ooze Decay** - Supernatural Disease

Humanoids and beasts contract ooze decay by drinking water which an ochre jelly has touched within the past 24 hours. The disease slowly turns its victims more ooze-like until they make complete transformations into ochre jellies.

Any humanoid or beast who drinks tainted water must succeed on a DC 13 Constitution saving throw or contract ooze decay. In 1d4 days the first symptoms begin to appear. An infected creature feels lethargic and hungry. Its skin takes on a pale yellow hue which darkens as the disease progresses. The creature's base walking speed is reduced by 5 feet and it has disadvantage on all Dexterity checks and saving throws.

At the end of each long rest, an infected creature must make a DC 13 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save, the creature's

base walking speed is reduced by another 5 feet. When the creature's walking speed becomes 10 feet, it transforms into an ochre jelly and if the creature is a PC, the GM takes control of the character. A transformed creature can only be returned to humanoid form by a wish spell. On a successful save, the creature regains 5 feet of its base walking speed. When the creature's base speed returns to normal, the disease is cured.

### **Aberrant Touch** - Supernatural Disease

Aberrant touch is a terrifying disease of the mind which drives creatures mad. Aberrations can carry and transmit this disease, but it has no ill effects on their minds. This disease is contracted by communicating telepathically with an infected creature.

A creature who exposes its mind through telepathic communication with another creature must succeed on a DC 15 Intelligence saving throw or contract aberrant touch. In 1d4 hours, the first symptoms begin to appear. An infected creature can only speak and understand Deep Speech, bleeds from its ears, and is covered in sores that ooze lime-green pus. The creature also gains a random form of long-term madness, as described in the GM's core rulebook.

At the end of each long rest, an infected creature must make a DC 15 Intelligence saving throw. On a failure the creature gains a random form of long-term madness. After three failures, the creature gains a random form of indefinite madness which can only be cured by eating the brain of an intelligent aberration. The disease is cured after three successes.

### **Walking Rot** - Mundane Disease

Walking rot is an urban plague feared by city dwellers everywhere. It is a festering skin disease which causes flesh to fall off an infected creature's bones, is highly infectious, and has a long incubation period. By the time

a victim starts showing signs of walking rot, that person has already infected many others. Elves, gnomes, and fey are immune to this disease, though no one knows why. As a result, communities experiencing an outbreak of the disease seek out those creatures for aid.

A creature who has touched another infected with the disease must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or contract walking rot. If a person who dies while infected is raised as an undead creature, they are able to pass walking rot on to anyone who touches them. The first symptoms take 1d4 weeks to appear. An infected creature's skin takes on a bright red rash which bleeds when touched. The creature's hit point maximum is reduced by 1d10. As the disease progresses, the skin turns black and the creature's flesh begins to fall off in small, rotten pieces.

At the end of each long rest, an infected creature must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw. On a failed save the creature's hit point maximum is reduced by 1d10. Once the creature's hit point maximum is half of what it would be without the disease, the creature's speed is halved. Once the creature's hit point maximum is a quarter of what it would be without the disease, the creature suffers disadvantage on all attack rolls and saving throws. Once the creature's hit point maximum is reduced to 0, the creature dies. On a successful save, the creature's hit point maximum increases by 1. If the creature's hit point maximum returns to what it would be without the disease, the disease is cured.

*Author - James Introcaso*

*Editor - James Haeck*

*Layout - Justin Buell*