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Before Band-Aids

When little children get hurt, the first thing they usually ask for is a Band-Aid to make their wounds feel better. But have you ever wondered what people used to cover wounds before Band-Aids were invented? Band-Aids have only been around since the 1920's, but people have been getting hurt for much longer than that. How people treated their wounds in the past may surprise you. In addition to cloth bandages, people often covered and cured their wounds with cobwebs.

Cobwebs are made by members of the spider family called *Theridiidae*. These spiders do not spin typical webs that look like concentric polygons. Unlike the mathematically magical webs of their cousins, these spiders spin a haphazard, sticky, crisscrossed net in which they trap their prey.



Most people associate cobwebs with an unkempt house, primarily because of the dust that accumulates on the adhesive strands of cobwebs. But though it might appear untidy, the presence of cobwebs does not suggest an unhealthy space. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Many types of cobwebs are laced with penicillin, fungi that contain antibiotic properties. Alexander Fleming, the discoverer of penicillin, came across the fungi when working with a colleague's cobweb collection.

When the cobwebs containing penicillin came into contact with some bacteria samples, the growth of the bacteria was halted, and the bacteria samples died. The discovery of penicillin for use as an antibiotic changed the face of modern medicine, as it helped treat many serious diseases. All along, that incredible cure was lurking in the rafters! It is no wonder that cobweb bandages were known for generations as a medical cure. Not only did the webbing help to coagulate the liquid oozing from the wound, but it also contained penicillin, a powerful fungal antibiotic that aided in the healing process. By using cobwebs to cover wounds, people with injuries were using antibiotics without even realizing it.

Cobwebs appear in the folktales of many cultures: cobwebs made of gold, cobwebs spun into gorgeous gowns, cobweb swings, Christmas trees draped in silver cobweb dresses. These days, cobwebs are used as eerie decorations in creepy Halloween scenes, or else they induce cranky frustration during spring-cleaning. Instead of being frustrated the next time you reach up to clean a dusty crevice, try to remember the medical treasure trove tangled in your broom.