

How women turned the tide against smallpox in the 1700s

Smallpox was far deadlier than the coronavirus the world is currently battling. Fatality rates were as high as 30%, and many of the dead were children. Those who survived were often left scarred by the disease, which covered the body in blisters.

But in the 1700s in the Ottoman Empire, centered around modern day Turkey, some women knew how to stop it.

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What these women knew was this: Take a bit of pus from a smallpox patient and use a needle to scratch a tiny amount just beneath the skin so it gets into the blood of a healthy person. That person would get a mild form of smallpox and become immune to the more serious version.

[Historian Akif] Yerlioglu says the practice is strikingly absent from Ottoman medical texts written by men, but accounts that do survive make clear that it was a well-known practice. "Women were sharing this knowledge, this know-how, among themselves," he says.

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