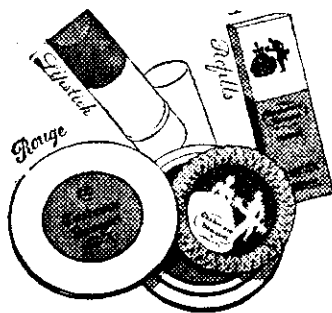




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## PELLAGRA

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. MURIEL BELL, Nutritionist to the Health Department)

IN this series on the Vitamin B complex, one of the most important factors in the prevention of disease in many lands is the pellagra - preventing factor, called nicotinic acid or niacin. The latter name was given by U.S.A. scientists to prevent the fallacious belief (and advertisements which imply) that it is the same as nicotine. The organic chemist understands the relationship, but nicotine still remains, from the pharmacological angle, a poison, while nicotinic acid is a food. Nicotinic acid stood in bottles on the shelf of the chemist long before its role in nutrition was discovered, and while thousands were still suffering or dying from pellagra; thus in U.S.A., in 1930, there were 7,000 deaths from pellagra, while the number of cases was over 120,000. It claimed more victims than tuberculosis, according to the statistics of one insurance company.

Pellagra is characterised by "the three D's"—"dermatitis, diarrhoea, and dementia"—signifying disorders of the skin, the alimentary canal, and the mind.

The history of the relationship of diet to this disease is fascinating. A U.S.A. Public Health doctor, Goldberger by name, noticed that those who remained free from the disease ate more fresh meat, eggs, or milk than those who developed the disease. The diets of the latter usually consisted largely of the "three M's"—maize meal, molasses, and salted meat (usually salted fat pork). Pellagra was prevalent among cotton-mill workers of the Mississippi area. Goldberger obtained permission to offer pardons to some convicts in an American jail if they would live on diets similar to those of the cotton-mill workers. After five months, symptoms of pellagra developed. Then Goldberger and his co-workers tried a heroic test to see whether they could infect themselves with pellagra by inoculating themselves with the various excretions from pellagra patients; none of them developed the disease, so it was obvious that pellagra was not infectious. Goldberger then tried animal experiments, which indicated that the pellagra-preventing factor was associated with Vitamin B1. In 1937, it was found that nicotinic acid would cure "pellagra" in animals. It takes not only nicotinic acid, but also other members of the Vitamin B complex to cure human pellagra, which is therefore a multiple-deficiency-disease.

### Effect on Morale

The mental symptoms respond remarkably to nicotinic acid. There have been instances where mental patients recover within a few hours. Apart from the more obvious cases of dementia, there are many pellagrins who are "on edge," quarrelsome, often depressed and apprehensive. A medical book states it thus: "Developing pellagra often causes a breakdown in personality. Men previously strong, courageous, and enduring, become shaky, weary, and apprehensive before clinical pellagra can be diagnosed. Nutritional deficiencies widespread in a population may not only weaken its strength, but may also break down its morale."

Next week the nicotinic acid values of foods will be given.