

# Edwin Smith Papyrus



The [Edwin Smith](#) papyrus (ESP) <sup>1)</sup> holds a very special position in the canon of the ten surviving major medical papyri from ancient Egypt. The text has a clear, logical structure. It describes injuries and wounds from head to toe (a capite ad calcem), separated into 48 cases. Again, each case is presented in a clearly structured manner. After the title, the diagnostic procedure and relevant clinical signs are enumerated. When deemed necessary, differential diagnostics are mentioned as well as an additional explanation of some of the clinical symptoms and specific medical terms.

A verdict follows that comprises three treatment possibilities: either the disease can be treated, or it is a disease “the physician will fight with,” or nothing can be done for the patient. Depending on this, treatment options are given <sup>2)</sup>.

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An ancient [Egyptian](#) text from approximately 1500 bce, described the “spillage of clear fluid from the interior of the brain”.

The Edwin Smith Papyrus is an ancient Egyptian medical text, named after the dealer who bought it in [1862](#), and the oldest known surgical treatise on trauma. This document, which may have been a manual of military surgery, describes 48 cases of injuries, fractures, wounds, dislocations, and tumors.

It dates to Dynasties 16–17 of the Second Intermediate Period in ancient Egypt, c. 1600 BCE.

The Edwin Smith papyrus is unique among the four principal medical papyri that survive today. While other papyri, such as the Ebers Papyrus and London Medical Papyrus, are medical texts based on magic, the Edwin Smith Papyrus presents a rational and scientific approach to medicine in ancient Egypt, in which medicine and magic do not conflict. Magic would be more prevalent had the cases of illness been mysterious, such as internal disease.

The Edwin Smith papyrus is a scroll 4.68 meters or 15.3 feet long. The recto (front side) has 377 lines in 17 columns, while the verso (backside) has 92 lines in five columns. Aside from the fragmentary outer column of the scroll, the remainder of the papyrus is intact, although it was cut into one-column

pages sometime in the 20th century. It is written right-to-left in hieratic, the Egyptian cursive form of hieroglyphs, in black ink with explanatory glosses in red ink. The vast majority of the papyrus is concerned with trauma and surgery, with short sections on gynecology and cosmetics on the verso.

On the recto side, there are 48 cases of injury. Each issue details the type of injury, examination of the patient, diagnosis, and prognosis, and treatment. The verso side consists of eight magic spells and five prescriptions.

<sup>1)</sup>

Allen JP, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, NY) (2005) The art of medicine in ancient Egypt. Metropolitan Museum of Art New York

<sup>2)</sup>

Brawanski A. On the myth of the Edwin Smith papyrus: is it magic or science? Acta Neurochir (Wien). 2012 Dec;154(12):2285-91. doi: 10.1007/s00701-012-1523-x. Epub 2012 Oct 17. PMID: 23074022.

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