Many medical advancements were made in the 1950s that greatly improved the overall health of millions of Americans. In fact, 1950 seemed to be a turning point in modern medicine.

Most antibiotics that are used today were discovered in the 1950s. Antibiotics work by interfering with bacteria to keep them from reproducing. Many serious diseases such as tuberculosis, syphilis, and staphylococcus that existed throughout history have had little to no treatment or cure. Although penicillin had been around for several decades before the 1950s, it was scarce and very expensive. When improvements in its production were introduced, penicillin quickly became the most widely used antibiotic, and it, along with other antibiotics in the same family, is still used today.

Streptomycin was discovered to be an effective cure for tuberculosis. Amoxicillin was especially effective for ear and bladder infections, and ampicillin effectively fought other bacterial infections. The reality of dying from a simple bacterial infection became much less likely with the introduction of these new antibiotics.

During the early 1950s, a terrifying epidemic occurred that affected millions of Americans. Poliomyelitis (also known as infantile paralysis) is a highly contagious illness that presents with sudden fever and chills, muscle weakness, and nausea. It struck most often during the summer, but no one at the time knew exactly how it was transmitted. Citizens were terrified of catching it, and many communities took extraordinary precautions to prevent it. Fear overwhelmed common sense. Public swimming pools and theaters were closed, meetings were cancelled, and some communities even sprayed clouds of DDT into the streets to kill insects, even though scientists had proven that flies did not carry the disease.

Patients who contracted polio were often paralyzed and had difficulty walking or breathing. Many children were forced to use braces to strengthen their legs and crutches to support themselves.

Iron lungs, huge steel capsules in which the patient was encased up to the neck, helped patients to breathe more easily. This invention was a great advance in medicine, but a terrible way to live.

Scientists including Albert Sabin and Jonas Salk searched desperately for a cure. Radio broadcasts urged Americans to send a dime to President Roosevelt to help fight polio, resulting in over $1 million flooding the White House and the foundation of the March of Dimes. Scientists learned that the disease entered the body through the mouth and was spread through contaminated water or food or by contact with others. Sabin developed a vaccine and, in a twist to the Cold War, eventually tested it in the Soviet Union because Americans feared polio too much to try the vaccine. His vaccine was administered orally.

Jonas Salk worked feverishly on his idea to develop a vaccine using a dead virus. This new process proved to be very successful in animals. Eventually, Salk found sources for human testing in orphanages and homes for the feeble minded. When these tests were successful, he pushed for wider field-testing. In 1953, hundreds of thousands of children were given the experimental vaccine. This was the largest human medical experiment in history. When the results were in, it was determined the vaccine had succeeded. The public celebrated this great success, and manufacturers rushed to deliver the vaccine across the country.
Both the live and dead vaccines for polio were eventually distributed. Polio cases decreased by 50%, and in 1964, the disease was declared eradicated in the United States.

The cure for polio was not the only medical success of the 1950s. In 1952, electric shock was used for the first time to restore a heartbeat. In this year also, the first artificial heart valve was successfully implanted in a human and the first kidney transplant was performed in 1956. During the same year, smoking became known as a health risk. At the time of this discovery, 48% of adults were smokers.

Ultrasound was used for the first time in 1958, and in 1959, a vaccine to cure diphtheria, polio, and whooping cough was discovered.

Schools and medicine became partners in the sense that many of the vaccines of the ’50s and early ’60s were given to students in schools. Polio vaccinations consisted of a drop of live virus on a sugar cube. Testing for tuberculosis was also done in the schools. Many baby boomers still carry a scar on their upper left arm from the smallpox vaccine.

These advancements were the foundation for improvements in medicine and medical procedures that were beyond mankind’s wildest dreams only a few years ago. Although medical science was making great strides in other areas, only 5% of medical students were female in 1955, and only 3% of medical students were African American. Opportunities for education for all people, regardless of race or gender, still needed to be increased.