

The Plague in the fourteenth century

What did people think caused the plague?

What was the plague?

How did they try to escape the plague?



What happened to everyone?

Where can you find out about the plague?

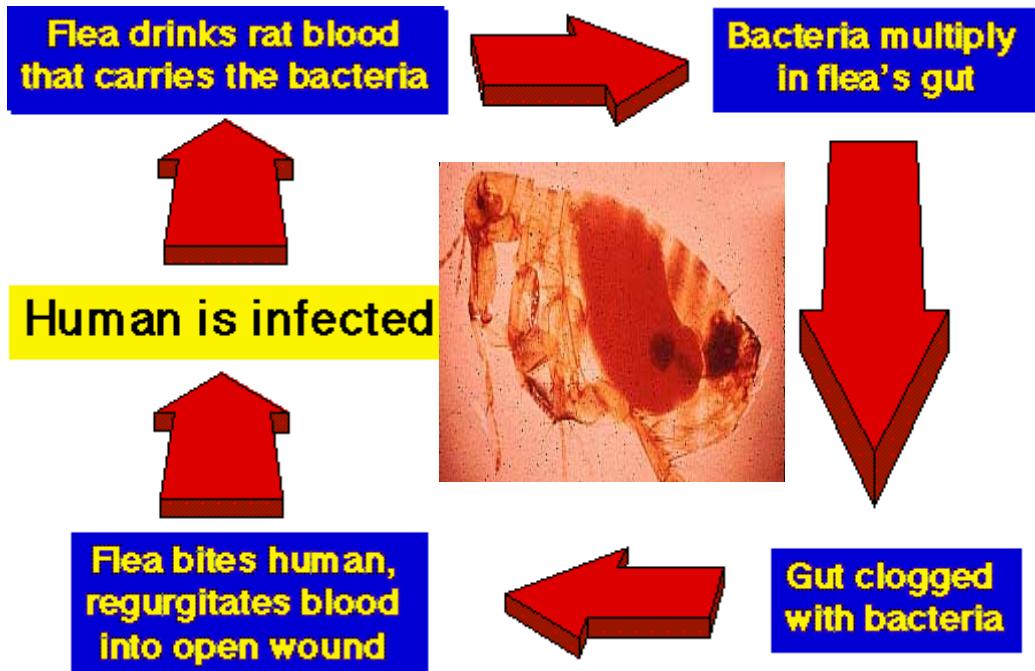
How did they treat the plague?

What really caused the plague?

Where is the plague now?



What really caused the plague?



Today we know what causes the various types of plague. We know how to stop the bubonic plague and how to treat the pneumonic plague, we can even recognise the septicaemia plague. The plague in the fourteenth century was mainly the bubonic plague which became the pneumonic plague.

To find out more why not look at:

www.insecta-inspecta.com

or

www.bbc.co.uk/history or look at the list at the back.



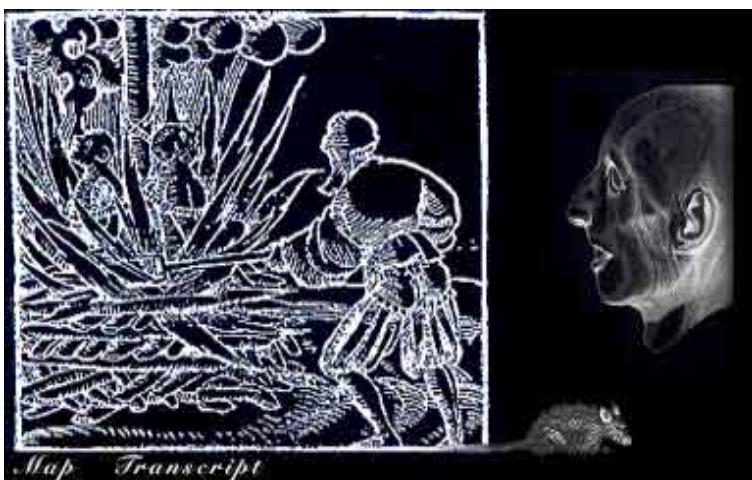
What did people think caused the plague?



There were lots and lots of different beliefs about the plague; people were so scared because they weren't sure what caused it. Some believed it was a punishment from God, some believed that foreigners or those who followed a different religion had poisoned the wells, some thought that bad air was responsible, some thought the position of the planets had caused the plague. All these different beliefs led to some strange attempts at escaping the plague and some even stranger cures.

Avoiding the plague

1. Avoid breathing in the same air as a plague victim.
2. Sit next to a blazing hot fire, (it worked for the Pope in the summer of 1348).
3. Live in a house sheltered from the wind and keep the window closed.
4. Attack foreigners and people of a different religion. (Twenty thousand Jews were burned to death in Strasbourg in 1348).



5. Letter from King Edward III to the Lord Mayor of London in 1349:

“You are to make sure that all the human excrement and other filth lying in the street of the city is removed. You are to cause the city to be cleaned from all bad smells so that no more people will die from such smells.”

6. You could walk around carrying flowers, herbs or spices, which you would often raise to your nose.
7. Live a separate life, only eating and drinking in moderation and seeing no one.
8. Run away to the country, leave everyone behind.
9. Go to church and ask for forgiveness.
10. Go on a pilgrimage. Punish yourself in public by joining the flagellants.



11. “No poultry should be eaten, no waterfowl, no pig, no old beef, altogether no fat meat. ...It is injurious to sleep during the daytime... Fish should not be eaten, too much exercise may be injurious... and nothing should be cooked in rainwater. Olive oil with food is deadly... Bathing is dangerous.”

12. “In the first place no man should think on death.... Nothing should distress him, but all his thoughts should be directed to pleasing, agreeable and delicious things... Beautiful landscapes, fine gardens should be visited, particularly when aromatic plants are flowering.... Listening to beautiful, melodious songs is wholesome.. The contemplating of gold and silver and other precious stones is comforting to the heart.”



But did any of these really help?

Task one

Can you create a poster advertising ways of avoiding the plague? Use colour and remember not to use any words about germs – they didn’t know about them.

Treatment

A famous surgeon named Guy de Chauliac realised there were two types of plague. He knew he couldn't help people with pneumonic plague, but he could help people with bubonic plague.

“The swelling should be softened with figs and cooked onions mixed with yeast and butter. When they are open they should be treated with the cure for ulcers. Towards the end of the plague I developed a fever with a swelling in the groin. I was ill near on six weeks. When the swelling had ripened and had been treated in the way I prescribed, I escaped, by God's good grace.”

But what was the way he prescribed? It was to cut open the boils and burn them with a red hot iron!!

If you were an ordinary doctor what could you do?



You could wear your special protective suit. The nose of this frightening looking costume was supposed to act as a filter, as it was filled with perfumes and what were thought of as cleaning vapours. The lenses were glass and protected the eyes from bad air (miasma). You were protected with gloves and a long robe as well as boots. You could make sure your patient had sweet smelling perfumes and herbs around to get rid of bad smells, you could try bleeding them.

Would it have helped? Well, maybe the suit kept the fleas off and stopped the doctors breathing in so many germs – but remember people wouldn't know why it worked. Most doctors knew they couldn't help and stayed away.

Task two

You are a doctor, what treatments would you use and how effective do you think they would be? Your brother is a priest, what treatments and ways of avoiding the plague does he tell you are best?

Task three

You are a writer – produce a piece for a modern day textbook on what people believed caused the plague in 1348.



A Flagellant

Flagellants were people who travelled about whipping each other. They believed that the Black Death was God's punishment. They punished themselves in order to beg forgiveness and travelled around, singing hymns and saying prayers.

**There were two types of plague.
What were the differences?**



Plague became a killer when the infection reached the lungs. This was called pneumonic plague, because it destroyed the breathing system. This plague could be caught if someone breathed on you.

Bubonic plague did not spread on the victim's lungs, but it caused large swellings as the body fought the disease. It's a similar effect when you have a boil. To catch this type of plague you had to be bitten by a flea that had already bitten a black rat. The swellings were on the lymph nodes. The white dots show you where these are.

What was London like before and after the plague?

The plague found an ideal spot when it reached London. Even before the plague London was full of diseases and it was no surprise. Dead animals and vegetables rotted together on the streets. The middle of the street was the place where people emptied their chamber pots and buckets of night soil.

Privies hung over the rivers and streams, or there were cess pools at the backs of the houses where the sewage seeped into the wells and drinking water. Rats loved it.

In 1348 London was one of the largest towns in Europe. Even the way the city was built helped to spread the plague, everyone was

What was London like before and after the plague?

crowded together. Families slept in one room, often with people sharing beds. Sometimes there were no beds and a dozen people could be found asleep on a straw covered mud floor. Animals slept in with them too.

The black rats loved the filth and the warmth, they loved the narrow streets with houses crammed together, they feasted on the rubbish, thrown out of windows on to passers by.

“It killed off many people every day. It spread so much that from the feast of the Purification (2nd of February) till after Easter more than two hundred bodies were buried daily in the new cemetery near Smithfield – to say nothing of other cemeteries. But, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, it departed from London at Whitsuntide.”

Your next task....
You are a visitor to
London in 1348 –
write home describing
the city just before the
plague.

Then write home asking
for help – you are stuck
in London at the start of
the plague, what can you
do to protect yourself?
Should you go home?

The Black Rat

The type of rat that existed in Europe at the time of the Plague was known as the Black Rat. It was smaller than the rats of today and was a flea carrier. Sometime around 1700 this type of rat died out in this country and was replaced by the Brown Rat, a non flea carrier.

The last outbreak of the plague in England was in 1665. The sensible thing to do when the plague struck was to get out of town, the rich could do this but the poor had nowhere to go.

The bubonic plague did not go away. It still exists, everywhere in the world. It is quite common among rodent populations – rats of course, but squirrels, rabbits and skunks as well. The Rocky mountains is one of the places where it is still widespread as is Mongolia. Every few years, even in the Rocky Mountains, you will be able to read in the papers about a hunter who has caught the disease. We have a cure for it, but it is a fast moving illness and sometimes not recognised fast enough.



Heard the word buboes? As in bubonic plague? This is what one looks like.

Your next task is to prepare a report on what we know today about the plague. Use all the sources available to you including the internet – some helpful sites are mentioned earlier in this booklet and some are at the back.

The Plague strikes!

The Black Death was worse in the towns and cities. London had the most deaths in Britain, too many to bury in a coffin, the bodies were just tipped into huge pits. Two new cemeteries had to be made outside the city.

People were used to death in the Middle Ages. Babies often died and people were thought old when they were 45; a poor harvest meant starvation and the slightest cut could mean an infection that led to death. But the Black Death was the worst thing people had ever known.



An eyewitness account by the Italian poet Boccaccio:

“Some shut themselves away and waited for death, others rioted from tavern to tavern. The sickness fell upon all classes without distinction. The rich passed out of this world without a single person to comfort them. The poor fell sick by the thousand and most of them died. The terror was such that brother even fled from broth, wife from husband, yea the mother from her own child.”

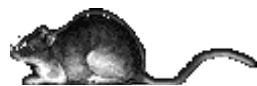
How many died? It's difficult to know exactly, there were no registers for deaths at the time. The Church was the only place that kept accurate records, with Bishops noting when new priests were appointed. In many areas half the churches had new priests in 1348-49. In some monasteries nearly all the monks died. This could be because so many priests visited the sick to comfort them, so they were likely to get infected. Once the disease got into the monastery it spread quickly. Historians estimate that about one third or more of the population of England and Wales died. This would be over one million people.

Changes

So many deaths meant that life changed for the people who survived. The biggest changes were on the farms and in the countryside. For the peasants things were getting better. The lords needed them to work the land but there were less people available. Labourers could ask for higher pay and get it. Wages trebled, villeins had a chance to break free and earn money by working for someone else.

A new law was passed saying that any one who paid more money than had been paid in the past could be fined. The law also said you could not move away without the lords permission.

Some people solved their farming problem by simply changing from corn to sheep. The peasants were angry, but found ways round the new laws. The next few years were hard, food was expensive and taxes were high to pay for the war against France, even the plague kept reappearing, five times before 1400. Sometimes whole villages were wiped out.



In Ireland a monk wrote of the terrible suffering caused by the plague; he kept a diary of what was happening and finally he knew he too was dying so left a space at the end of his diary to be written in by those who came after.

Your final task is to imagine you are a survivor of the plague and you have found his diary, add your story to his final words....

Bonus question!!

Can you plague proof your family? And come up with five good reasons for not visiting them while they were ill?

www.thehistorynet.com

[http://history.idbsu.edu/westciv.plague](http://history.idbsu.edu/westciv/plague)

<http://ponderous-pine.uoregon/Students/Janis>

<http://www2.educ.ksu.edu/Faculty/FarmleyJ/BlockonePDS/Team6F97/bubonicplague.html>

www.ecnet/users/gemedia3/Plague/Plague.html

www.tudortimes.com/stories.htm#Plague

Need a search engine?

Try visiting www.schoolhistory.co.uk
and use the links from there