
The Black Death: Key Facts About The Bubonic Plague

A silent killer that appeared out of no where and wiped out over a third of Europe's population and in some places entire cities. The black death was an epidemic like no one had ever seen before and hopefully will never see again. So, what made the plague so deadly and how did society react to the plague?

The black plague is caused by a bacterium called by the scientific name *Yersinia Pestis* which is a zoonotic bacterium carried by small mammals and fleas. With an average of seven infections reported per year in the USA and one thousand to two thousand cases reported annually worldwide the plague is of no major concern with modern medicine if caught early enough.

Yersinia Pestis comes in three separate forms each of which had its own unique symptoms and methods of being transmitted yet each equally as deadly as the other. The scary thing about each is that one can become the other, if your septicemic you can become bubonic or if your bubonic you could become septicemic.

Bubonic plague gets its name from the large lymph nodes it causes called buboes. These buboes are large red swollen lymph nodes that develop near the region of the bite causing large black scabs, hence the name, Black Death. After 2-6 days patients develop fever, headache, chills, and weakness. This form is usually the result of an infected flea bite. Bubonic plague was 50% fatal.

The other form although less common yet more contagious was the pneumonic plague. Patients develop fever, headache, weakness, and pneumonia. Pneumonic plague may develop from inhaling infectious droplets or from untreated bubonic or septicemic plague that spreads to the lungs. Pneumonic plague is the most serious form of the disease and is the only form of plague that can be spread from person to person. Pneumonic Plague was close to 90% fatal.

After the plague developed in a person the plague would become septicemic and travel through the bloodstream of an infected person and cause blood poisoning. Others still could become septicemic after coming into contact with infected meat or blood. Symptoms of the septicemic infection included nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and extreme blood loss which for many was through coughing while others would suffer from internal bleeding or blood loss through urination causing many doctors to use urine color as a sign of health. Septicemic infection was nearly 100% fatal.

A common belief was that the black death was caused by miasma or "bad air." As a result, many practices were developed to help keep the bad air away. These included burning aromatics, carrying around fragrant herbs, and avoiding anything that may open pores to miasma such as bathing which helped spread the infections. Large fires would often be seen through cities in hopes that the smoke may drive away the miasma.

The plague was especially deadly given that many lived near one another and had no health practices such as the ones we do today. Due to the unhealthy environment, close living conditions, and the perfect habitat for those that carried the bacterium the disease was able to

easily take hold and wipe out communities in a matter of days. For many it became a waiting game to see if the plague would take them.

As the plague spread indiscriminately a new job was opened to those who were willing, Plague Doctors. Despite Doctor being in the name Plague Doctors were more likely to be tasked with keeping track of the casualties in cities and need not have any qualifications to become a so called "doctor".

Plague Doctors wore leather suits from head to toe coated in animal fats and wax to protect them from the bad air. A leather mask with a beak was also worn with aromatics being placed in the beak to combat miasma. Despite their fearful appearance plague doctors were held with high respects for their attempts to comfort the sufferings and would help with organizing the dispersal of the dead one's properties others would at times be taken hostage and held at ransom.

Plague Doctors, many of whom had no prior medical experience, would resort to anything that they felt may cure the disease resulting in innumerable so called "cures." Amongst some of the more bizarre treatments included rubbing human feces over the buboes, bloodletting, and putting mercury on an infected. Many of these cures helped to hasten the infection rather than to cure it and may even have helped to spread the infection to others.

As a result of the infections many who were able chose to flee in hopes of outrun this mysterious killer. Others still, such as those of Islamic faith, remained because of the belief that the plague was the will of God. Often though the only ones who could escape were the rich and wealthy leaving those of little means at the hands of the infection.

Escape though did not always guarantee one to remain in healthy conditions. With the bacterium taking a few days to show any symptoms many could have had the disease long before they fled. Some areas attempted to limit the spread of disease by limiting travel through the country. Italy for example would turn away any ships that they felt came from an infected region. Further protective measures were put into place by quarantining anyone who wished to enter for 30-40 days.

The churches attempted to use their strong influences in the communities to help contain the spread of the disease. Some attempted to limit people from travelling to and from infected areas while another rule was made to keep people from coming into contact of the dead infected bodies by mandating, they be left alone until they could be sealed in wooden caskets.

Clement VI who was the pope from 1342 to 1352 had declared that confessions could be made to anyone, even a woman, and still be forgiven. This at the time was a big deal since only those with authority in the church could perform these actions and caused many to question the church's actions and showing how desperate many had become by abandoning their own strong held traditions.

Due to the higher than average fatality rates of the clergy, large issues in the church centered communities of mediaeval Europe arose. With many positions remaining unfilled the church resorted to bringing in anyone they could, even the uneducated. This created tension as many in the communities saw this as another failure of the church as a leading figure.

Due to the strong authority that the church had many turned to religion believing that God had sent the plague as punishment for their sins which had two major outcomes; flagellants, which was the practice of whipping oneself or other forms of self-torture to appease god and persecuting the Jews.

Anti-Semitism was already on the rise in Europe during the dark ages which was only heightened by the strong held belief held by many that the Jews had poisoned the food and water supplies to kill the so-called ungodly Christians. As a result, Jews were either killed, banished, or quarantined which due to their rules on cleanliness helped keep Jewish deaths as a result of illness down.

Those who practice Flagellants would whip and beat themselves often in public and large gatherings to create a large public display. Many would even beg the plague doctors to beat them with their canes. This practice was held until it was dismissed by the pope when it seemed to come to an abrupt halt.

As a result of the rising death tolls, labor shortages became commonplace. Lands that were once overworked were left abandoned with no one to plow and harvest the fields. With labor being in high demand but in short supply land owners needed to pay higher wages and provide for improved working conditions.

Lands that were once overcrowded and overused had now become desolated creating an overabundance of housing and farm lands. This in turned caused lower food prices and housing prices allowing the lower class of people to have improved lives. These events helped in bringing about an end to the feudal system.

These new changes brought discomfort to those of authority. Many attempts were made restore society to the way it was before the plague, yet these efforts were often met with violent riots. Many historians hold the belief that the black death may have been what helped push society out of the dark ages and into the renaissance.

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