The Black Death

The plague, otherwise called “the Black Death”, was a disease that killed millions of Europeans during the middle ages. Over 40% of the population is estimated to have died during the course of the disease.

Instructions

Put yourself in Medieval times working for the European Health Organization. You boss has asked you to put together a Health Warning Pamphlet to help people better understand the black death so that they can better protect themselves. Below is a list of sections that your boss has asked you to include in your pamphlet.

- What is the disease and what did it do to Europe
- How it is spread
- What are the symptoms
- What are the medieval cures
- Possible social impacts of the black death – How did the disease hurt or help towns and people
- What is the actual treatment for the disease?

Each section must contain a drawing (no stick figures!) representing something important in that section.

Add color, titles, borders and designs to enhance the look and effectiveness of your pamphlet.

Read the following information to help you gather the information that you will need for your pamphlet.

What is the black death?

In Medieval England, the Black Death was to kill 1.5 million people out of an estimated total of 4 million people between 1348 and 1350. No medical knowledge existed in Medieval England to cope with the disease. After 1350, it was to strike England another six times by the end of the century. Understandably, peasants were terrified at the news that the Black Death might be approaching their village or town.

The Black Death is the name given to a disease called the bubonic plague which was rampant during the Fourteenth Century. In fact, the bubonic plague affected England more than once in that century but its impact on English society from 1348 to 1350 was terrible. No amount of medical knowledge could help England when the bubonic plague struck. It was also to have a major impact on England’s social structure which lead to the Peasants Revolt of 1381.

The Black Death was caused by fleas carried by rats that were very common in towns and cities. The fleas bit into their victims literally injecting them with the disease. Death could be very quick for the weaker victims.

What was it like for a victim of the plague?

It started with a headache. Then chills and fever, which left him exhausted and prostrate. Maybe he experienced nausea, vomiting, back pain, soreness in his arms and legs. Perhaps bright light was too bright to stand.
Within a day or two, the swellings appeared. They were hard, painful, burning lumps on his neck, under his arms, on his inner thighs. Soon they turned black, split open, and began to ooze pus and blood. They may have grown to the size of an orange.

Maybe he recovered. It was possible to recover. But more than likely, death would come quickly. Yet... perhaps not quickly enough. Because after the lumps appeared he would start to bleed internally. There would be blood in his urine, blood in his stool, and blood puddling under his skin, resulting in black boils and spots all over his body. Everything that came out of his body smelled utterly revolting. He would suffer great pain before he breathed his last. And he would die barely a week after he first contracted the disease.

Written evidence from the time indicates that nearly all the victims died within three days though a small number did last for four days.

**Why did the bubonic plague spread so quickly?**

In towns and cities people lived very close together and they knew nothing about contagious diseases. Also the disposal of bodies was very crude and helped to spread the disease still further as those who handled the dead bodies did not protect themselves in any way.

The filth that littered streets gave rats the perfect environment to breed and increase their number. It is commonly thought that it was the rats that caused the disease. This is not true – the fleas did this. However, it was the rats that enabled the disease to spread very quickly and the filth in the streets of our towns and cities did not help to stop the spread of the disease.

**Treatments**

The Black Death wreaked havoc throughout Medieval England. The Black Death killed one in three people and was to have a direct link to the Peasants Revolt of 1381. ‘Cures’ for the Black Death went from the absurd to having a degree of common sense about them. Regardless of this, the casualty figures for the Black Death were massive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Vinegar and water treatment</strong></th>
<th>If a person gets the disease, they must be put to bed. They should be washed with vinegar and rose water</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lancing the buboes</strong></td>
<td>The swellings associated with the Black Death should be cut open to allow the disease to leave the body. A mixture of tree resin, roots of white lilies and dried human excrement should be applied to the places where the body has been cut open.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bleeding</strong></td>
<td>The disease must be in the blood. The veins leading to the heart should be cut open. This will allow the disease to leave the body. An ointment made of clay and violets should be applied to the place where the cuts have been made.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Diet</strong></td>
<td>We should not eat food that goes off easily and smells badly such as meat, cheese and fish. Instead we should eat bread, fruit and vegetables</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sanitation</strong></td>
<td>The streets should be cleaned of all human and animal waste. It should be taken by a cart to a field outside of the village and burnt. All bodies should be buried in deep pits outside of the village and their clothes should also be burnt.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pestilence medicine</strong></td>
<td>Roast the shells of newly laid eggs. Ground the roasted shells into a powder. Chop up the leaves and petals of marigold flowers. Put the egg shells and marigolds into a pot of good ale. Add treacle and warm over a fire. The</td>
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Lack of medical knowledge meant that people tried anything to help them escape the disease. One of the more extreme was the flagellants. These people wanted to show their love of God by whipping themselves, hoping that God would forgive them their sins and that they would be spared the Black Death.

Social Impacts of the Black Death

The Black Death had a huge impact on society. Fields went unploughed as the men who usually did this were victims of the disease. Harvests would not have been brought in as the manpower did not exist. Animals would have been lost as the people in a village would not have been around to tend them.

Therefore whole villages would have faced starvation. Towns and cities would have faced food shortages as the villages that surrounded them could not provide them with enough food. Those lords who lost their manpower to the disease, turned to sheep farming as this required less people to work on the land. Grain farming became less popular – this, again, kept towns and cities short of such basics as bread. One consequence of the Black Death was inflation – the price of food went up creating more hardship for the poor. In some parts of England, food prices went up by four times.

How did peasants respond?

Those who survived the Black Death believed that there was something special about them – almost as if God had protected them. Therefore, they took the opportunity offered by the disease to improve their lifestyle.

Feudal law stated that peasants could only leave their village if they had their lord’s permission. Now many lords were short of desperately needed labour for the land that they owned. After the Black Death, lords actively encouraged peasants to leave the village where they lived to come to work for them. When peasants did this, the lord refused to return them to their original village.

Peasants could demand higher wages as they knew that a lord was desperate to get his harvest.
So the government faced the prospect of peasants leaving their villages to find a better ‘deal’ from a lord thus upsetting the whole idea of the Feudal System which had been introduced to tie peasants to the land. Ironically, this movement by the peasants was encouraged by the lords who were meant to benefit from the Feudal System.

To curb peasants roaming around the countryside looking for better pay, the government introduced the **Statute of Labourers** in **1351** that stated:

*No peasants could be paid more than the wages paid in 1346. No lord or master should offer more wages than paid in 1346. No peasants could leave the village they belonged to.*

Though some peasants decided to ignore the statute, many knew that disobedience would lead to serious punishment. This created great anger amongst the peasants which was to boil over in 1381 with the Peasants Revolt. Hence, it can be argued that the Black Death was to lead to the Peasants Revolt.

**The Modern Treatment and Cure of the Bubonic Plague (aka Black Death)**

When an occasional case arises (normally of the Bubonic variety) Health Authorities will isolate the patient, trace their movements and destroy the rodent population responsible for the outbreak. This is easily done today but was virtually impossible in the 14th Century. Other events were required to stop the spread of the disease such as the Great Fire of London in 1666. In 1932, with sulphonamide drugs (A seven to ten day course of antibiotics), there was finally an effective treatment for the plague. There is a vaccine, but because it takes several weeks to become effective, it would be of little use during an epidemic.