

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Copyright Regulations 1969

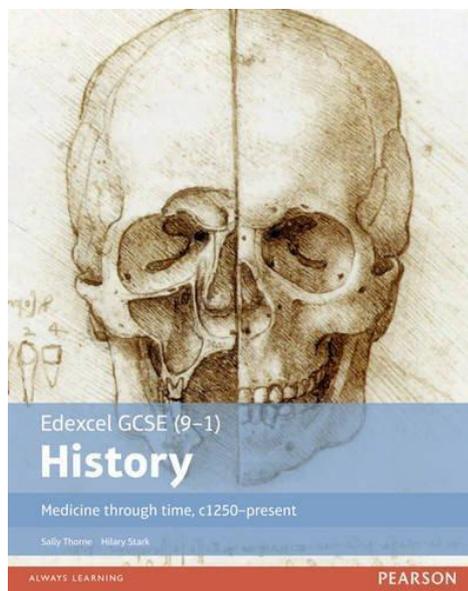
WARNING

This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Methodist Ladies' College pursuant to Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Stark, H., & Thorne, S. *Medicine through time, c1250-present : student book*. Harlow, U.K. : Pearson Education Limited.



1.3 Dealing with the Black Death, 1348–49

Learning outcomes

- Understand what the Black Death was and how it affected people in England during the years 1348–49.
- Understand the disputed causes, treatments and preventative measures used during the time of the Black Death.

In 1348, a new disease reached the shores of England. It had spread from the Far East along trade routes, arriving in Sicily in 1347, quickly spreading across the whole of Europe. The **Black Death**, as it eventually came to be known, was a new plague that was unfamiliar to the ordinary people of England, as well as English physicians. Within months, it had spread the length and breadth of England, killing thousands of people. It was absolutely devastating: it didn't matter if you were rich, poor, a city dweller or a country farmer – the plague did not discriminate. Those who caught it could expect to die within a matter of days.

Source A

This engraving from the 14th century shows somebody suffering from the Black Death.



The disease still occurs every so often in modern times, but it is easily treated with antibiotics and patients usually make a full recovery, as long as it is caught in time. In the Middle Ages, treatments like this did not exist. People were completely unprepared, and they did not know how prevent and treat the 'scourge'*.

Key term

Scourge*

A person or thing that causes great suffering.

Source B

In this extract from a report on the Black Death written in 1347, Italian chronicler Marchione di Coppo Stefani describes how helpless people felt in the face of the epidemic (outbreak).

Neither physicians nor medicines were effective. Whether because these illnesses were previously unknown or because physicians had not previously studied them, there seemed to be no cure. There was such fear that nobody seemed to know what to do.

The Black Death

The Black Death was an outbreak of the bubonic plague. The bacteria were carried in the digestive system of fleas who arrived in England on rats carried by merchant ships. It was probably spread by flea bites, although some recent evidence suggests that it was also spread in the air. The main symptom was buboes, which was swelling in the armpit or groin, filled with pus.

Once caught, it was unlikely that you would survive the disease. It usually killed its victims in three to five days. At its height in London, 200 people were being buried every day. Contemporary accounts estimate that a third of the population of England died. Where the plague spread, it was common for more than half of a population of a town or city to die.

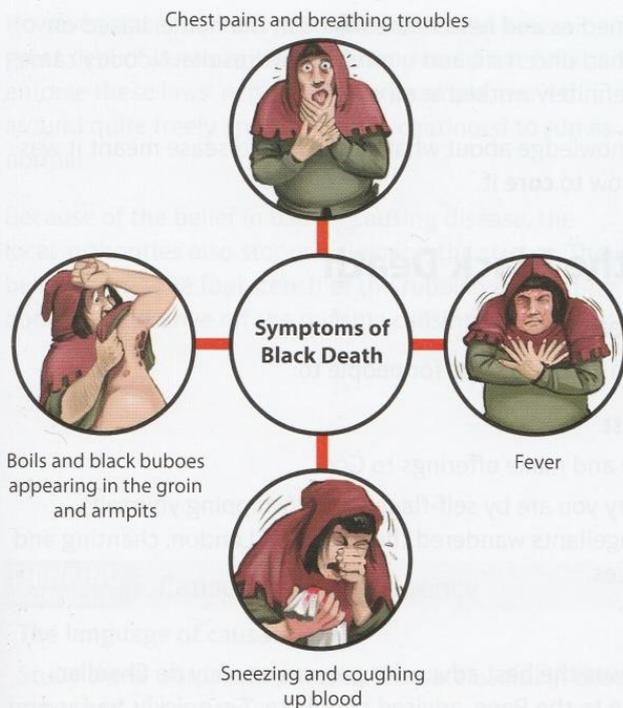


Figure 1.8 Symptoms of the Black Death.

The Black Death is the name given by Victorian historians to the particular outbreak of the plague in 1348. After this, the plague returned every 10–20 years, although it killed fewer people with each subsequent outbreak.

People applied the same knowledge they had about the causes of disease and illness to the plague. New treatments appeared and advice on how to avoid catching the disease spread quickly.

Causes of the Black Death

Religious and supernatural

Many believed that the Black Death was the result of God deserting mankind – that is, the Black Death was a punishment for the sin in the world.

In 1345, there was an unusual positioning of the planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, which astrologers interpreted as a sign that something wonderful or terrible was about to happen.

Natural causes

The main natural cause attributed to the Black Death was impure air. Breathing in this miasma caused

corruption to the body's humours. People believed that this impure air may have originated from poisonous fumes released by an earthquake or a volcano.

Common beliefs

For the everyday people living in the cities and countryside, the spread of the Black Death was terrifying and they would have heard many conflicting ideas about what caused it. In Europe, many people blamed the Jewish population, but the Jews had been expelled from England in the 13th century, so this was not the case in England.

Treatments of the Black Death

Supernatural

The main recommendation to treat the Black Death was to confess your sins, and ask God for forgiveness through prayer. However, there was an air of inevitability about the disease: once caught, people believed it was clearly God's will; if it was his will that the patient should die, there was no cure that would work.

Natural

To begin with, physicians tried bleeding and purging – the same things they would usually do to correct a humoral imbalance. Unfortunately, that didn't work and, in fact, seemed to make people die more quickly.

As well as this, physicians recommended strong-smelling herbs like aloe and myrrh, which were believed to have cleansing properties. They often prescribed theriaca, as it was believed to work for lots of ailments. Lighting a fire and boiling vinegar could also drive off the bad air. Physicians or surgeons sometimes lanced the buboes – occasionally, people whose buboes burst survived.

Common beliefs

Everyday people were willing to try anything to survive the Black Death. They held strong Christian beliefs, and so would have gone to confession and prayed, as well as seeking traditional cures like bleeding. However, it quickly became clear that neither priests nor physicians were capable of curing the disease.

Activity



In groups of four, use the information above to create a television news report about the possible causes of the Black Death and what advice sufferers were given. One of you should play the part of a journalist, while the others take on the roles of priest, physician and an everyday person. Remember to give advice on both how to treat the disease and how to prevent it.

Apothecaries sold remedies and herbs were mixed in the home, based on old recipes, but they had uncertain and unpredictable results. Nobody came up with a cure that definitely worked in all cases.

The lack of medical knowledge about what **caused** the disease meant it was impossible to know how to **cure** it.

Preventing the Black Death

Supernatural means

The main advice given by priests was for people to:

- pray to God and fast
- go on a pilgrimage and make offerings to God
- show God how sorry you are by self-flagellation (whipping yourself). Large groups of flagellants wandered the streets of London, chanting and whipping themselves.

Natural means

Escaping the plague was the best advice for prevention. Guy de Chauliac, who was the physician to the Pope, advised people to: 'Go quickly, go far, and return slowly'. It was essential to escape the foul air to stay healthy.

If this kind of movement was impossible, people believed it was essential to carry a posy of flowers or fragrant herbs and hold it to your nose. This helped to avoid breathing in the miasma. Unlike the usual advice on preventing disease, people were advised to avoid bathing. It was believed that water would open the skin's pores to the corrupted air.

Common beliefs

One physician in Italy recommended doing joyful things, listening to cheerful music and avoiding anything sad as a protection against the disease. This is a clue as to just how desperate most physicians felt – they were willing to suggest anything to prevent their patients from catching the disease.

Much like the physicians, people did not know how to prevent the disease. However, they did stop visiting family members who had caught the plague – the common belief of the need to avoid those with the disease was so great that even their houses were avoided.

Government action

Local authorities attempted to take action to prevent the plague from spreading. New quarantine* laws were put in place to try to stop people from moving around too much. People new to an area had to stay away from everybody else for 40 days, to ensure they were not carrying the disease. Authorities also started to quarantine houses where the plague had broken out. They considered banning preaching and religious processions, to stop large crowds of people gathering.

Key term

Quarantine*

Separating the sick from the healthy to stop the spread of a disease. Those who are sick are not allowed to leave the quarantined area.

However, since the local government did not have a great deal of power at this time, they could not fully enforce these laws: rich people, for example, moved around quite freely and the Church continued to run as normal.

Because of the belief in bad air causing disease, the local authorities also stopped cleaning the streets. They believed that the foul stench of the rubbish and rotting bodies would drive off the miasma causing the plague.

Interpretation 1

Writer Sean Martin shares his views, and those of other historians, on the impact of the Black Death, in his book, *A Short History of Disease* (2015).

One immediate effect of the pandemic [an infectious disease spread across a large region] was the invention of quarantine. Historian GM Trevelyan argued that the Black Death was at least as important as the industrial revolution, while David Herlihy argued that the Black Death was “the great watershed”, [an important turning point] without which there would have been no Renaissance, and with no Renaissance, no industrial revolution.