

Medieval Medicine

Fact Sheet

The Black Death was one of the biggest killers of the Middle Ages. This infamous plague had a devastating effect on the population of Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries.

Caused by bacterium carried by fleas most often found on rats, the deadly bubonic plague caused oozing swellings (buboes) all over the body. Victims suffered from skin that was darkly discoloured (turning black), one reason why the plague has subsequently been called the 'Black Death'.

The Black Death killed between a third and half of the population of Europe, an estimated 20million people. Contemporaries did not know what caused the plague or how to avoid catching it. They sought explanations for the crisis in God's anger, human sin, and outsider/marginal groups. If you were infected with the bubonic plague, you had a 70–80 per cent chance of dying within the next week.

As a result of the plague, life expectancy was low, in late 14th-century Florence it was just under 20 years.

Some of the 'cures' included:

- Rubbing onions, herbs or a chopped-up snake (if available) on the boils or cutting up a pigeon and rubbing it over an infected body.
- Drinking vinegar, eating crushed minerals, arsenic, mercury or even ten-year-old treacle!
- Sitting close to a fire or in a sewer to drive out the fever or fumigating the house with herbs to purify the air.
- People who believed God was punishing you for your sin, 'flagellants', went on processions whipping themselves.
- Doctors often tested urine for colour and health. Some even tasted it to test.