

The Great Plague

What was the Great Plague?

During the summer of 1665, London was rocked by a horrible disease. This became known as the Great Plague. People were terrified of the plague, as there was no cure and little was known about how it was spread.

Health and hygiene

In 1665, medicine and health care were very different than they are today. Hygiene was often very poor; towns and villages could be dirty. Also, doctors and researchers did not know as much about medicine as they do now, consequently many diseases had no cure. This meant that the disease spread rapidly.



How the plague spread

At first, people were unsure about how the plague was spread. They hoped that if the reason could be found, the plague could be controlled or stopped. Some doctors felt that poisonous air was to blame, and if people breathed bad air in, they became unwell. Others blamed farm animals.

However, the cause of the plague was rats. Rats carried bacteria, which was spread to people by flea bites. When people sneezed and coughed, they spread the disease even more. The Mayor of London believed that dogs and cats were to blame. Consequently, he ordered that these animals were destroyed.

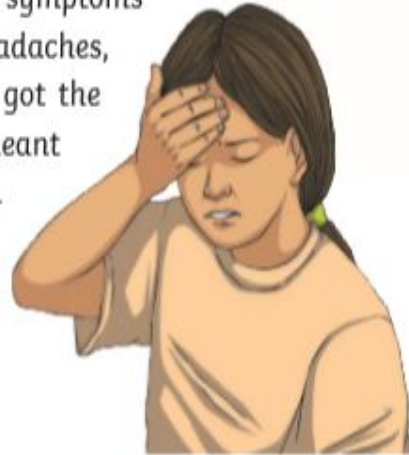


What happened if someone caught the plague?

The plague spread very quickly. Within three to four days of catching the disease, people were dying. Some symptoms were painful swelling of the skin, blisters, headaches, fever and sickness. If someone from a family got the plague, the whole house was sealed. This meant that nobody could get in or out of the building.

A red cross was marked on the front door of any houses where somebody had the plague.

As many as 100 000 people had died in London by the end of 1665.



How was the plague stopped?

In the autumn of 1666, the weather was very cold. This killed off many of the rats and fleas which were spreading the virus. Also, the Great Fire of London, in the same year, destroyed many rat-infested buildings. This seriously reduced the rat population.



Plague Remedies

As there was no cure, people tried alternative remedies to try to prevent them from being infected by the plague.

- **Small bunches of flowers:** people thought that holding them to their noses, would stop them from breathing in any bad air or bacteria.
- **Lucky charms:** people wore them to ward off the plague, one example is wearing a dead toad around the neck!
- **Soaking money in vinegar:** when paying for goods, money was soaked in vinegar before giving it to someone else.

Week 1 day 3 non fiction challenge 2

1. Why was the plague so frightening to people?

2. What reasons could there be, for there being no cure for the Great Plague?

3. How did people try to prevent themselves from catching the plague?

4. Why might the fact that many cats and dogs were killed, have actually helped the outbreak to spread further?

5. Why do you think houses with the plague were sealed, even though it meant the families inside would die without help?

6. How was the plague eventually controlled and stopped?

7. How must it have felt to be living in London at this time? Explain your answer using as much detail as possible, and remember to use evidence from the text.
