

The Great Plague

What was the Great Plague?

During the summer of 1665, London was rocked by a horrific disease, which became known as the Great Plague. Despite the fact that there had been an outbreak of the plague (the Black Death) 300 years before this, there was still no cure. For this reason, people were terrified of the plague as they were aware that, for many, it meant certain death. 1665 was during the seventeenth century and at this time, medicine and health care were very different than they

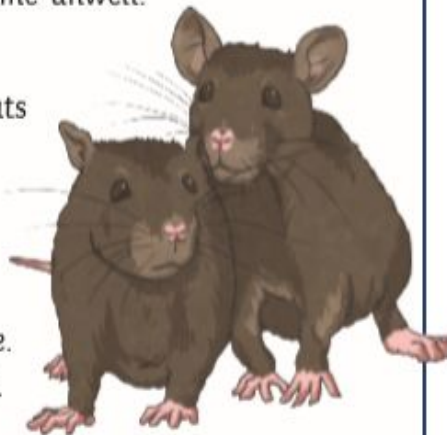
are today. Hygiene was often very poor; towns and villages could be dirty and unsanitary. Also, medical knowledge was limited and this explains why the plague caused so much destruction.



How the plague spread

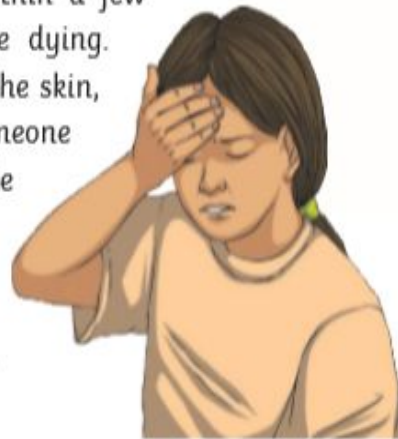
There were many concerns about how the plague was spread. It was hoped that if the cause of the plague could be found, it could be better controlled or stopped. Some doctors felt that poisonous or bad air was to blame. As people continued to breathe it in, they became unwell. Others blamed farm animals.

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 domestic animals, such as dogs and cats were to blame. He ordered that these animals were destroyed.



What happened if someone caught the plague?

The plague spread extremely quickly, and within a few days of contracting the disease, people were dying. The infected suffered from painful swelling of the skin, blisters, headaches, fever and vomiting. If someone from a household contracted the plague, the whole house was sealed. A red cross was marked on the front door of any houses where somebody had the plague, along with the words 'Lord have mercy on us'. Historians believe that 100 000 people died in London by the end of 1665.



How was the plague stopped?

In the autumn of 1666, the weather was particularly cold. This killed off many of the rats and fleas which were spreading the virus, as well as reducing the spread of bacteria. Also, the Great Fire of London, in the same year, which destroyed thousands of homes and buildings, also helped to stop the plague. The fire spread rapidly due to the fact that the houses were so close together and made of wood. The fire destroyed many rat-infested buildings, severely reducing the rat population.



Plague Remedies

As there was no cure, people tried alternative remedies to try to prevent them from contracting 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.

1. Why were people so terrified of the plague?

2. What reason might people have expected there to be a cure by 1665?

3. What do you think it means that houses were sealed when somebody caught the plague?

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

5. What does the phrase 'medical knowledge was limited and it was not known how to cure many diseases' mean?

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

7. Why did the disease spread to so many so quickly?

8. Why do you think the cold weather helped to stop the plague?

9. What does 'alternative remedies' mean?

10. 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.
