

The Great Plague

What was the Great Plague?

During the summer of 1665, London was affected by a horrible disease.

This became known as the Great Plague.

People were terrified of the plague, as there was no cure.

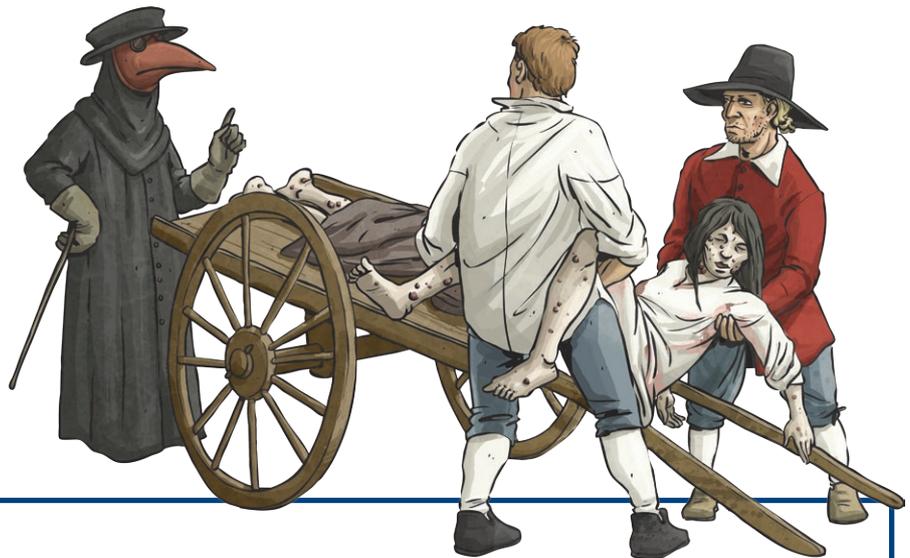
It lasted from 1665 until 1666.

Why was there no cure?

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.

People had a different understanding of medicine at this time.



How did the plague spread?

- At first, people were not sure how the plague was spread.
- Some doctors felt that bad air was to blame, and breathing in made people ill.
- Others blamed farm animals for spreading the disease.
- However, the cause of the plague was rats.
- Rats carried bacteria and fleas.
- When the fleas bit people, they infected them.
- When people sneezed and coughed, they spread the disease even more.

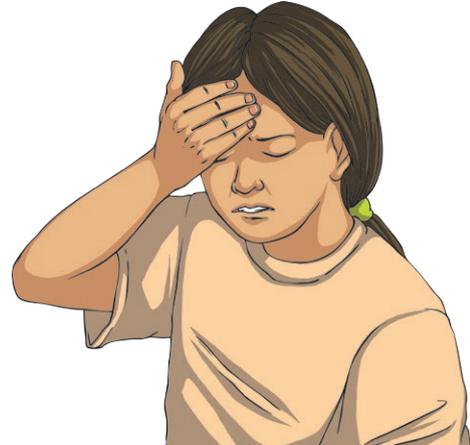


What happened if someone caught the plague?

The plague spread very quickly. Within three to four days of catching the disease, people were dying.

Some symptoms included:

- painful swelling of the skin;
- blisters;
- headaches;
- sickness.



If someone from a family got the plague, the whole house was closed up and nobody was allowed to leave, or enter the house.

A red cross was marked on the front door of any these houses, so people knew that they had the plague.

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

How was the plague stopped?

Cold weather – Autumn 1666. This killed off many of the rats and the bacteria.

The Great Fire of London – 1666. This destroyed many rat-infested buildings. This meant there were less rats to spread the disease.



Plague Remedies

As there was no cure, people tried different methods to try to prevent them from getting 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.

Questions

1. When did the plague happen?

2. What reasons did people think caused the plague to spread?

3. What actually caused the spread of the plague?

4. How could people tell if a household was affected by the plague?

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

6. What does prevent mean?

7. How did the cold weather help to stop the spread of the plague?

Answers

1. When did the plague happen?
The plague happened from 1655 until 1666.
2. What reasons did people think caused the plague to spread?
Some people felt that the plague was spread by bad air, which made people ill when they breathed it in. Others felt that the plague was spread by farm animals. The Mayor of London felt that dogs and cats spread the disease.
3. What actually caused the spread of the plague?
Rats were the cause of the plague.
4. How could people tell if a household was affected by the plague?
If a household was affected by the plague, a red cross was painted on the front door of the house.
5. How did people try to prevent themselves from catching the plague?
Many tried holding small bunches of flowers to their noses, to stop themselves from breathing in bacteria. Some people wore lucky charms, such as a dead toad around their necks.
6. What does prevent mean?
Prevent means to stop something from happening, in this case people tried to stop themselves from being infected by the plague.
7. How did the cold weather help to stop the spread of the plague?
The cold weather killed off rats and bacteria, so the spread of the plague slowed down.

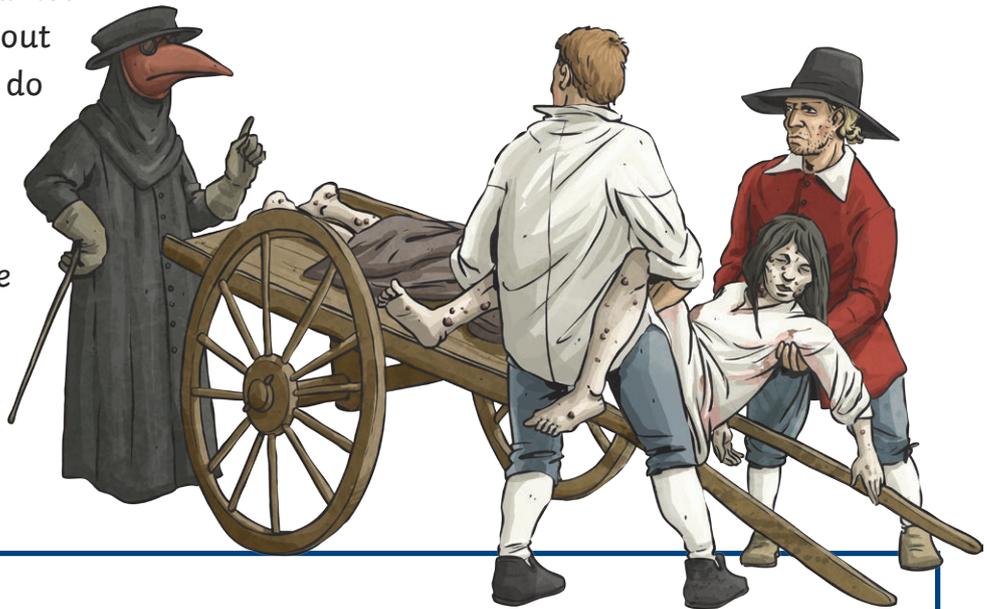
The Great Plague

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

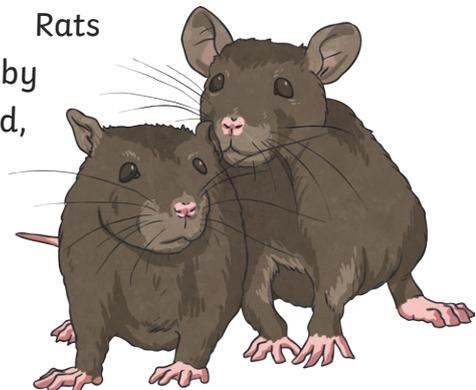
In 1665, medicine and health care were very different than they are today. Hygiene was often very poor; towns and villages could be dirty. Also, doctors and researchers did not know as much about medicine as they do now, consequently many diseases had no cure. This meant that the disease spread rapidly.



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.

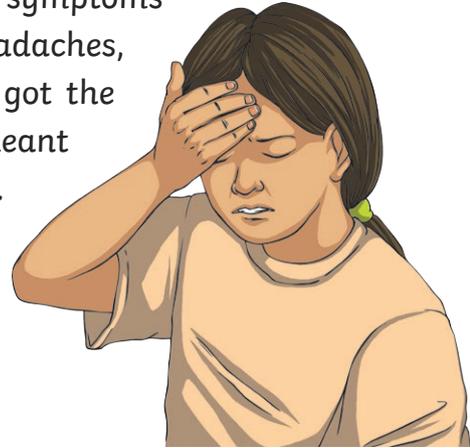
However, the cause of the plague was rats. Rats carried bacteria, which was spread to people by flea bites. When people sneezed and coughed, they spread the disease even more. The Mayor of London believed that dogs and cats were to blame. Consequently, he ordered that these animals were destroyed.



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.

Questions

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?

Answers

1. Why was the plague so frightening to people?
The plague was frightening as there was no cure and for many it meant certain death.
2. What reasons could there be, for there being no cure for the Great Plague?
The reasons why there was no cure are that the doctors did not know as much about medicine and diseases as we do now. Also the conditions were unhygienic, and this makes it hard to treat disease.
3. How did people try to prevent themselves from catching the plague?
Many tried holding small bunches of flowers to their noses, to stop themselves from breathing in bacteria. Some people wore lucky charms, such as a dead toad around their necks
4. Why might the fact that many cats and dogs were killed, have actually helped the outbreak to spread further?
Cats and dogs were predators of rats, so therefore there were less animals to kill the rats. This meant their population grew, so there were more rats to spread disease.
5. Why do you think houses with the plague were sealed, even though it meant the families inside would die without help? **The houses were sealed because there was no other way to stop the disease from spreading. By keeping those infected inside and unable to have contact with others, it was hoped the disease would stop being spread.**
6. What does rat-infested mean?
Rat-infested means that the buildings has been taken over by rats. The buildings were overrun with rats.
7. How was the plague eventually controlled and stopped?
The cold weather killed many of the rats and fleas, who were the cause of the plague, as well as killing bacteria. Also the Great Fire of London destroyed many rat-infested buildings, killing more rats.
8. 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.
Various answers, but answers must refer to the sense of fear and the unknown. Also the sadness and despair at seeing so many people falling victim to the plague. Some answers may discuss how doctors must have felt helpless and frustrated that there was so little they could do to help people.

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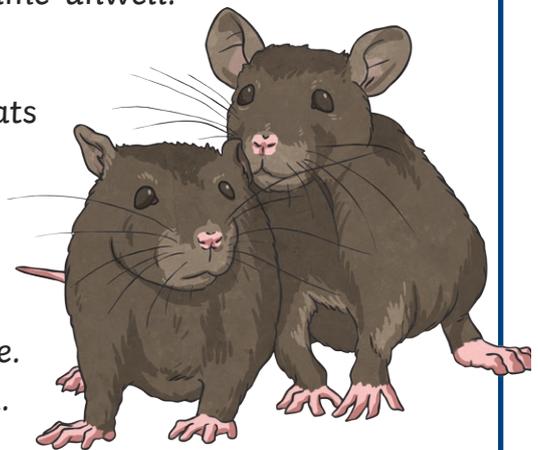
During the summer of 1665, London was rocked by a horrific disease, which became known as the Great Plague. Despite the fact that there had been an outbreak of the plague (the Black Death) 300 years before this, there was still no cure. For this reason, people were terrified of the plague as they were 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

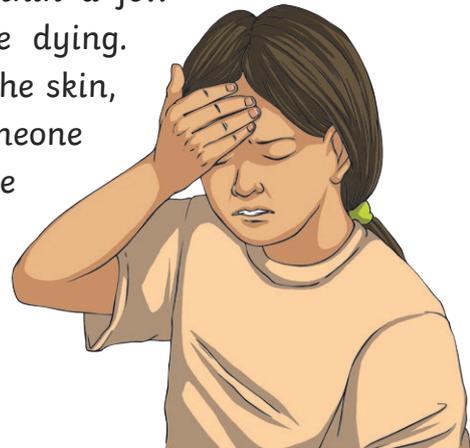
There were many concerns about how the plague was spread. It was hoped that if the cause of the plague could be found, it could be better controlled or stopped. Some doctors felt that poisonous or bad air was to blame. As people continued to breathe it in, they became unwell. Others blamed farm animals.

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.

Questions

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?

Answers

1. Why were people so terrified of the plague?
People were terrified of the plague, as there was no cure and that for many it meant certain death.
2. What reason might people have expected there to be a cure by 1665?
People may have expected there to be a cure by 1665 because outbreaks of plague had been common in Britain for centuries before this (the most devastating outbreak was the Black Death in 1348).
3. What do you think it means that houses were sealed when somebody caught the plague?
This means that nobody inside the house was able to leave, and nobody from outside could enter the building. This was done to isolate victims, so they could not spread the disease.
4. Why might the fact that many cats and dogs were killed have actually helped the outbreak to spread further?
Cats and dogs were predators of rats, so therefore there were less animals to kill the rats. This meant their population grew, so there were more rats to spread disease.
5. What does the phrase 'medical knowledge was limited and it was not known how to cure many diseases' mean?
This phrase means that in the seventeenth century, people did not know as much about illnesses, diseases and how to treat them as we do today. It also means that technology and research have moved on a great deal since that time, and we understand much more about how diseases spread and how to prevent and treat them.
6. Why do you think houses with the plague were sealed, even though it meant the families inside would die without help?
The houses were sealed because there was no other way to stop the disease from spreading. By keeping those infected inside and unable to have contact with others, it was hoped the disease would stop being spread.
7. Why did the disease spread to so many so quickly?
There could be a number of answers, but answers referring to the unsanitary conditions and the cramped conditions of those living in parts of London.
8. Why do you think the cold weather helped to stop the plague?
Cold weather kills germs and bacteria, which means they cannot thrive and spread. Also, the cold weather killed many of the rats and fleas, who were the cause of the plague.

9. What does 'alternative remedies' mean?

This means that, as there was no medicinal cure, people tried to think of different things from their local areas and everyday lives that they could prevent themselves from getting ill.

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.

Various answers, but answers must refer to the sense of fear and the unknown. Also the sadness and despair at seeing so many people falling victim to the plague. Some answers may discuss how doctors must have felt helpless and frustrated that there was so little they could do to help people.