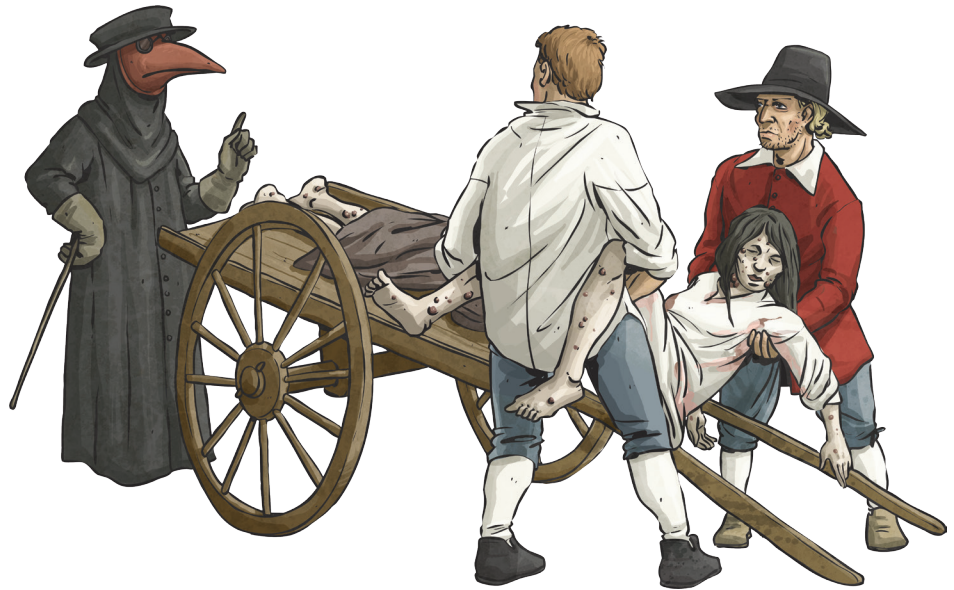


The Great Plague

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

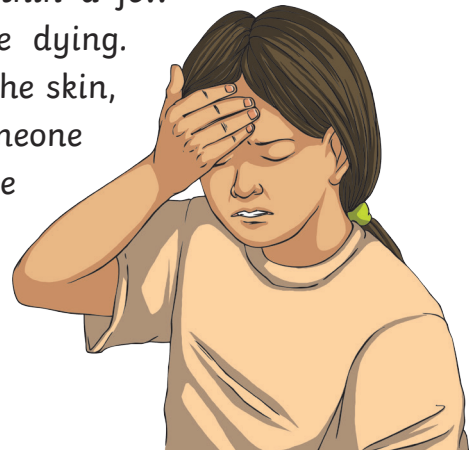
There were many concerns about how the plague was spread. It was hoped that if the cause of the plague could be found, it could be better controlled or stopped. Some doctors felt that poisonous or bad air was to blame. As people continued to breathe it in, they became unwell. Others blamed farm animals.

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.

Questions

1. Why were people so terrified of the plague?

2. Why might people have expected there to be a cure for the plague by 1665?

3. a) Houses were sealed when somebody caught the plague. What do you think this means?

b) Why do you think this helped to stop the spread of the disease?

4. How did killing cats and dogs cause 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 did the disease spread so quickly?

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

8. What does 'alternative remedies' mean?

9. 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.

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. Why might people have expected there to be a cure for the plague by 1665?
People may have expected there to be a cure for the plague by 1665 because outbreaks of the plague had been common in Britain for centuries before this (the most devastating outbreak was the Black Death in 1348).
3. a) Houses were sealed when somebody caught the plague. What do you think this means?
This means that nobody inside the house was able to leave, and nobody from outside could enter the building.

b) Why do you think this helped to stop the spread of the disease?
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.
4. How did killing cats and dogs cause 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 did the disease spread 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.
7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.