

# Medicine During the Middle Ages

The Middle Ages, 476 AD until 1453, was not a great time to be alive, especially if you got sick! People were only expected to live to about 30 years old and one in five children died before they turned one. Many people died from simple injuries like cuts or broken limbs and women often died during childbirth. Diseases were also a major killer along with leprosy and smallpox.

Unfortunately for the people alive during that time, medicine was worse than it had been during the time of the Roman Empire. It was based around a mixture of supernatural superstitions, herbal remedies, bleeding and purging.

## Medieval Doctors and the Treatments They Administered

Medieval doctors had little idea about what caused disease. Many believed in the theory of The Four Humours developed by Galen, a Greek doctor who lived during the Roman Empire. The theory stated that illness was caused by an imbalance of the four humours - phlegm, black bile, yellow bile and blood. Many doctors believed that people's health, and the treatment they received, was linked to the position of the stars.

During plagues and epidemics, people would blame witches or groups who were culturally different for causing the illness. Some believed that the illness was a punishment sent by the Gods or that it was due to the alignment of the planets.

Because of the lack of understanding of what caused the illness, the treatments that doctors administered were not always successful at treating the patient at all, and some treatments actually made the problem worse. Treatments included:

- Trepanning - cutting a hole in the person's skull.
- Bleeding - cutting the patient and letting them bleed.
- Applying leeches.
- Giving the patient something to make them vomit or give them diarrhea.
- Giving them bunches of herbs to smell.
- Making the patient take very hot or cold baths.
- Praying.
- Sitting in a smoky room.
- Whipping the person.
- Mixtures of various herbs.



Although most of these treatments are no longer used by modern medicine, the practice of using certain herbs was effective and is still used today.

### Medieval Surgery

During the middle ages, there were many conflicts and the resulting wars gave doctors a chance to work on their surgical skills. These doctors made a few discoveries that proved to be major steps forward for medicine. They discovered the following:

- Wine could be used as a mild antiseptic.
- Drugs, such as opium, could be used as painkillers.
- Surgery could be used for closing up wounds to help them heal.
- Broken bones could be reset.

### Public Health Care

Monasteries set up hospitals to take care of the poor. Unfortunately, people who were often very ill were not allowed into the hospital as they were scared that the illness would spread to other patients. Many towns had good quarantine laws. The houses of plague victims were boarded up and they were isolated from others. Major efforts to improve sanitation of cities were initiated, including ensuring that water supplies were kept clean, rubbish and sewage were removed, and food was inspected to make sure that it was safe for people to consume.

### The Black Death

Towards the end of the Middle ages (between 1347 to 1351), the bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death, spread through North Africa, Europe and Asia. The plague originated on black rats that had travelled to Europe on ships. It passed quickly from the rats to people who often lived in cramped conditions. It was mainly spread through flea bites (fleas from the rats) but could also be transferred through coughs and sneezes. Almost everyone who contracted the plague died. Their symptoms included fatigue, high temperatures, strange swellings and difficulty breathing. Doctors at that time did not understand the disease and were not successful in treating it. The common range of treatments included; carrying herbs with you, praying, purging and bloodletting. It is estimated that between 50 and 200 million people died from the plague.

# Questions

1. When did the Middle Ages take place?  

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2. List three reasons why the writer of this passage feels that the Middle Ages was not a great time to be alive, especially if you are sick  

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3. Who came up with the theory of The Four Humours?  

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4. Other than The Four Humours not being in balance, what other four explanations were given for an illness?  

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5. Of all the treatments used by medieval doctors, which proved effective and is still used today?  

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6. Where did doctors get to develop and practice most of their surgical skills?  

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7. Which four breakthroughs in surgery took place during this time?  

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8. Who set up the hospitals during the Middle Ages?  

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9. Why do you think the bubonic plague of the Middle Ages is often referred to as The Black Death?  

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10. Suggest two things that people could have done to prevent the spread of the black death?  

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# Answers

1. When did the Middle Ages take place?  
**476 AD until 1453**
2. List three reasons why the writer of this passage feels that the Middle Ages was not a great time to be alive, especially if you are sick.  
**Any three: People were only expected to live to about 30 and 1 in 5 children died before they turned one. Many women died during childbirth and people died from simple injuries like cuts or broken limbs. Diseases were also a major killer along with leprosy and smallpox. Doctors did not understand diseases.**
3. Who came up with the theory of The Four Humours?  
**Galen, a Greek doctor who lived during the Roman Empire**
4. Other than The Four Humours not being in balance, what other four explanations were given for an illness?  
**People would blame witches or groups who were culturally different for causing the illness. Some believed that the illness was a punishment sent by the Gods or that it was because of the alignment of the planets.**
5. Of all the treatments used by medieval doctors, which proved effective and is still used today?  
**The use of herbs**
6. Where did doctors get to develop and practice most of their surgical skills?  
**On the battleground**
7. Which four breakthroughs in surgery took place during this time?  
**Wine could be used as a mild antiseptic.  
Drugs such as opium could be used as painkillers.  
Surgery could be used for closing up wounds to help them heal.  
Broken bones could be reset.**
8. Who set up the hospitals during the Middle Ages?  
**The monasteries**
9. Why do you think the bubonic plague of the Middle Ages is often referred to as The Black Death?  
**Any suitable – many people died so a dark time, the rats were black**
10. Suggest two things that people could have done to prevent the spread of the black death?  
**Any suitable – quarantine, masks, get rid of rats and fleas**