

# KILLER DISEASE

1. Imagine living in the 1300s; a time when there were no toilets, showers, antibiotics or rubbish collection. People in towns and cities lived close together, threw their waste into the streets and rarely washed. These dirty conditions provided a perfect home for rats and a place for germs to spread. In Europe, between 1348 and 1352, rats, disease and bad hygiene combined to kill around twenty-five million people (about a third of the total population). The spread of this disease was called the Black Death or the Black Plague.
2. The Black Death was caused by three kinds of plague: bubonic (infection of the lymph glands), septicaemic (infection of the blood), and pneumonic (infection of the lungs). It is thought most people died from bubonic plague, which was spread by rats. Many of the plentiful rats carried a deadly bacteria. When the fleas living on these rats bit them, they took the disease into their stomachs. When the fleas with infected rat blood bit a human, the disease went into that human.
3. Once a human was infected with bubonic plague, he or she became sick quite quickly with a headache, fever and pain. Then burning lumps, called buboes, would appear on the neck, underarms and inner thighs. The lumps turned black, then split open, oozing pus and blood. Some people got better, but most people died a painful death about one week after getting the disease. Those with septicaemic and pneumonic plagues died even more quickly, but usually didn't develop buboes.
4. At the time, it was not known what was causing the disease, how it was spread or how to treat it. People died so quickly and in such high numbers that there weren't enough people to bury the dead. They were left on the streets or flung into rivers or big pits in the ground, which probably helped to further spread the disease.
5. Plague has struck many times in history and this disease is still around today. Hundreds of people become infected with it every year, but few die because it can now be treated with antibiotics.

