

“The Pardoner’s Tale” from The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer
Enrichment: Plague

Plague is a serious disease caused by *Yersinia pestis*, a bacteria found in rodents and the fleas that live on them. The disease can spread to human beings if they are bitten by the infected fleas, if they come in direct contact with infected body tissues or body fluids, or if they breathe in the bacteria through the air. In human beings, plague has three forms. In bubonic plague, the bacteria settles in the lymph nodes, causing painful lumps called buboes. Other symptoms include fever, headache, chills, tiredness, and stomach upset. If left untreated, the bacteria can multiply in the bloodstream to cause septicemic plague, which adds the symptoms of severe abdominal pain and bleeding in the skin and internal organs. If the bacteria infects the lungs, the person develops pneumonic plague, breathing with great difficulty and coughing up blood. In this stage, one person can spread the plague to another by coughing at close range.

Without early treatment, septicemic plague and pneumonic plague are usually fatal. However, plague today can be effectively treated with several kinds of antibiotics, as long as they are started early in the course of the disease. Antibiotics will usually work even for someone exposed to pneumonic plague if they are given quickly enough.

In times past, there was no known treatment for the plague, and periodic outbreaks were devastating. Probably the most famous outbreak was the one during Chaucer’s childhood called the Black Death, which swept from Asia to Europe in the mid-1300s, killing as much as a third of the population.

DIRECTIONS: Answer these questions based on the information above and the details in “The Pardoner’s Tale.”

1. What are the three stages of plague, and what part of the body does each one attack?

2. Can someone with bubonic plague transmit it by breathing on someone else? Explain.

3. Why do you think plague spread so rapidly in medieval cities?

4. How do you think readers in Chaucer’s day felt when they read about plague? Why?

5. What attitude toward death evident in the “The Pardoner’s Tale” might be partly explained by the frequent outbreaks of plague in Chaucer’s day?
