

# Flea bite is likely cause of Oregon teen's bubonic plague

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Members of the media photograph one of the skeletons found by construction workers under central London's Charterhouse Square, March 26, 2014. Twenty-five skeletons were uncovered last year during work on a new rail line under the heart of the city. Archaeologists immediately suspected the bones came from a cemetery for victims of the bubonic plague that ravaged Europe. Photo: AP/Letteris Pitarakis

An Oregon teenager has come down with the bubonic plague. The dreaded disease killed around 60 percent of the European population during the Middle Ages. Since then it has never been completely wiped out.

Authorities believe a flea infected the girl during a mid-October hunting trip. She became ill, was hospitalized and is now recovering in an intensive care unit. No new cases of the disease have been discovered since then.

"Many people think of the plague as a disease of the past," Oregon public health official Emilio DeBess said. The truth is, "it's still very much present in our environment, particularly among wildlife."

"Fortunately, plague remains a rare disease," DeBess continued. However, he added, to keep it that way people do need to be cautious when dealing with wildlife.

## **Beware The Rodents**

The bubonic plague typically spreads through flea bites or when plague bacteria comes in contact with an individual's broken skin. People often become sick quickly. Typically the first symptoms are fever, headache, chills, weakness and swollen lymph glands.

To protect themselves from the disease, people should avoid contact with wild animals such as squirrels, chipmunks or other rodents, who can carry fleas, DeBess said. They should also keep pets away from such animals.

The disease is certainly not common, however, as Oregon has had only eight cases of plague over the past 20 years.

In the United States overall, there were only 1,006 cases of plague between 1900 and 2012, most of them of the bubonic variety. In recent times, the United States has averaged about seven cases of human plague a year, mostly in the western states. Eleven cases of plague were reported this year from April through August.

## **Antibiotics Have Saved Many**

When bubonic plague is left untreated, plague bacteria can invade the bloodstream. Usually, this results in rapid death.

The chances of beating the disease became much greater once antibiotic medicines were discovered. In the early years of the 20th century, before the introduction of antibiotics, 66 percent of bubonic plague cases in the United States were fatal. Between 1990 to 2010, only 11 percent were.

The "Great Plague" or "Black Death" of the Middle Ages is just one of three major plague outbreaks in recorded history. The first was the Justinian Plague, which began in 541 A.D. It killed more than 25 million people over 200 years.

## **Plague Wasn't Done Yet**

The Black Death was next. It started in 1334 in China, then spread along trade routes to Europe. The disease eventually wiped out 60 percent of the European population. Some say the plague actually hastened modernization in Europe, despite the terrible losses it caused. With so few workers left, machines had to be invented to make certain kinds of work possible.

The final major outbreak is known as the Modern Plague. It also began in China, during the 1860s. The disease appeared in Hong Kong by 1894 and was spread throughout the world by rats on ships over the next 20 years. It was during that outbreak that scientists discovered the plague was caused by a bacteria and often spread through fleas.

## Quiz

- 1 Which section of the article suggests that the plague may have had a positive effect on human history?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-4]
  - (B) "Beware The Rodents"
  - (C) "Antibiotics Have Saved Many"
  - (D) "Plague Wasn't Done Yet"
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST explains the cause of the plague?
- (A) The dreaded disease killed around 60 percent of the European population during the Middle Ages.
  - (B) Authorities believe a flea infected the girl during a mid-October hunting trip.
  - (C) The bubonic plague typically spreads through flea bites or when plague bacteria comes in contact with an individual's broken skin.
  - (D) To protect themselves from the disease, people should avoid contact with wild animals such as squirrels, chipmunks or other rodents, who can carry fleas, DeBess said.
- 3 Read the sentence from the section "Antibiotics Have Saved Many."

*In the early years of the 20th century, before the introduction of antibiotics, 66 percent of bubonic plague cases in the United States were fatal.*

Which sentence from the article has a word with a similar meaning to "fatal"?

- (A) An Oregon teenager has come down with the bubonic plague.
- (B) Since then it has never been completely wiped out.
- (C) Usually, this results in rapid death.
- (D) It also began in China, during the 1860s.

4 Read the sentence from the section "Plague Wasn't Done Yet."

*Some say the plague actually hastened modernization in Europe, despite the terrible losses it caused.*

Does "hastened modernization" have a positive or negative meaning? What part of the sentence gives a hint to your answer?

- (A) Negative. "Some say the plague..."
- (B) Positive. "Some say the plague..."
- (C) Negative. "...despite the terrible losses..."
- (D) Positive. "...despite the terrible losses..."