**Bubonic Plague:** In the 14th century (the 1300's), a horrible disease struck Asia, Africa, and Europe. The people called this illness the Black Death. The disease started in Asia in the 1340's. It quickly spread to Africa, and throughout Europe.

Infected people first broke out with red ring shaped marks with dark center spots on their arms and necks. They would run high fevers. They became even more ill, and then they died.

In just two years, 25 million people died of the plague. In ten years, the plague had killed over 1/3 of Europe's population.  Can you imagine the fear people must have felt?

People were sick everywhere. Whole families were wiped out. Whole villages were wiped out.

At first, people locked their doors trying to protect themselves. They carried flowers to ward off the smell of the dead and dying. The skies were filled with ashes as people burned houses filled with the dead. Villages filled with the dead were burned down, to contain and kill the disease. Nothing worked.

Outbreaks of the disease seemed to come in cycles. Just as people thought it was over, a new rash of illness would hit the towns, and from the towns move to the villages.

People did not know that infected rats carried the disease. They thought it was a punishment from God for being wicked. They believed if you were bad, you would get the plague and die.

The towns were hit the hardest. There was no sanitation in the towns. People threw their garage out on the street. To a rat, coming off a ship docked at port, the towns must have seemed like heaven.

Medieval knowledge of health, hygiene, and medical practices was very limited. Commoners and nobles alike took infrequent baths. The peasants slept and worked in the same clothes for days and even weeks at a time without washing themselves or their clothes. The nobles were not much better. Soap was made of lye, which was very rough on the skin. There was no toothpaste or toothbrushes. People used watered spices on their lips and teeth, but all that did was briefly hide the smell of rotting teeth. Peasants died young from malnutrition and the simplest of diseases. Women died in childbirth from ignorance. People handled cattle and then directly handled food.

Even before the plague, what is amazing really is that *anyone* lived. The truth is, only the very strong survived. But the strong had no defense against the Black Death. No one was safe. And millions of people died.

Outbreaks of the plague continued for two hundred years. The cause of the plague was not discovered until the 20th century (1900's.) Today, this disease is called the bubonic plague. We have a vaccine for the plague should an outbreak ever happen again. We're lucky. The people in the Middle Ages did not have vaccines to protect themselves from many diseases as we do today.