

Primary and Secondary Sources on Health in Medieval Europe

Diseases spread quickly in the Middle Ages and were dangerous because people had little idea of how to prevent them. Many people believed illnesses were caused by evil spirits. They did not understand how germs multiplied and were passed on, and they had few effective drugs. Living conditions were often dirty, and germs bred quickly. Lice and mites lived in people's hair and on their skin. Fleas lived in their thick woolen clothes. They carried disease from one person to another, and from animals to humans. The worst of these was bubonic plague, known later as the Black Death. In three years, 1347–49, this disease killed about one-third of the population of Europe, or 20 million people. Few families escaped without death, and sometimes an entire village was wiped out. Those who were called doctors had little knowledge, and people believed that the plague was a punishment sent by God for their wickedness. Encouraged by the Church, many also blamed the Jews for their suffering.

- In **medicine**, the position of the planets was of utmost importance. When a doctor was sent for, he came on horseback...an assistant followed him and many servants, bearing five or six instruments and numerous sorts of ointment. When he reached the home of the sick man, his first business was not to count his pulse or note his temperature, but to inquire under what constellation he was born...however much a medicine might be needed, it was not to be taken when the **moon** was in an unfavorable sign. (WKWB, pp. 316–317)
- Physicians were described as wearing expensive robes of silk with trimmings of fur....They demanded large fees. (WKWB, p. 318)
- Notwithstanding all their charts and stars...**doctors** gave great attention to diet, bodily health, and **mental attitude**....They could set broken bones, extract teeth, remove bladder stones, remove cataracts of the eye with a silver needle, and restore a mutilated face by a skin graft from the arm. (ADM, p. 106)
- When an **epidemic** appeared, it was of course laid to the **stars** or the power of **evil spirits**....In France, Germany, and Italy (where there was great anti-Jewish

sentiment), Jews were many times accused of poisoning the wells or even the air and were either imprisoned or put to death on this charge. (WKWB, p. 317)

- (One) **remedy** for the illness of a child was to weigh the child and then offer up at some shrine its weight in bread or grain or cheese or wax. (WKWB, p. 317)
- To make a dose (of medicine) powerful, the sick man must repeat a certain psalm twelve times together with several “Our Fathers” while the medicine was being prepared. (WKWB, p. 317)
- **Poor people** had not the money necessary to buy their lives of these great doctors, and therefore they went with their ailments to the barber. He was permitted by law to apply plasters and ointments to wounds that did not threaten to become dangerous, and often to give simple remedies. In most diseases, the first treatment was to bleed the patient, and the barber’s pole today is a reminder of the custom. (WKWB, p. 318)
- Often when a person was sick, the illness would be attributed to bad blood. Consequently, doctors attempted to cure the illness by **bloodletting**. In this process, doctors made a cut, usually in the arm over a large vein, and allowed the person to bleed until all the bad blood was believed to be gone. Doctors also used leeches—bugs which suck blood from humans—to drain bad blood.
- Medieval **surgery** was brutal and often fatal. There was no anaesthetic, and patients often died from shock and loss of blood. Infections also killed many people after surgery, since doctors did not understand the importance of keeping wounds clean...the usual treatment for fever was to bleed a patient. (MAEL, p. 19)
- The disease (**bubonic plague**)...showed strange black swellings about the size of an egg or an apple in the armpits or groin. The swellings oozed blood and pus and were followed by spreading boils and black blotches on the skin from internal bleeding. The sick suffered severe pain and died quickly within five days of the first symptoms. (ADM, p. 92)
- So lethal (deadly) was the disease that cases were known of persons going to bed well and dying before they woke, of doctors catching the illness at a bedside and dying before the patient. (ADM, p. 92)

- When **graveyards** filled up, bodies were thrown into the river until mass burial pits were dug...in such pits corpses piled up in layers until they overflowed....Everywhere reports speak of the sick dying too fast for the living to bury. (ADM, p. 94)
- Barefoot in sackcloth, sprinkled with ashes, **weeping**, praying, tearing their hair, carrying candles and relics, sometimes with ropes around their necks or beating themselves with whips...(people) wound through the streets, imploring the **mercy** of the Virgin Mary and saints. (ADM, p. 103)
- On charges that they were poisoning the wells, with intent “to kill and destroy the whole of Christendom and have lordship over the whole world,” the lynchings began in the spring of 1348 after the first plague deaths....Jews were dragged from their houses and thrown into bonfires. (ADM, p. 109)
- When it came to the plague, **sufferers** were treated by various measures designed to draw poison or infection from the body: by bleeding, purging with laxatives or enemas, lancing or cauterizing the swellings, or applications of hot plasters.... Medicines ranged from pills of powdered stag’s horn or myrrh and saffron to potions of gold. Compounds of rare spices and powdered pearls or emeralds were prescribed...doctors advised that floors should be sprinkled, and hands, mouth, and nostrils washed with vinegar and rosewater. (ADM, pp. 106–7)
- “And no bells tolled,” wrote a chronicler of Siena, “and nobody wept no matter what his loss because almost everyone expected death....People said and believed, ‘This is the **end of the world.**’” (ADM, p. 95)
- When the plague was ended...the poor moved into empty houses, slept on beds, and ate off silver. Peasants acquired unclaimed tools and livestock, even a wine press, forge or mill left without owners, and other possessions they had never had before. (ADM, p. 117)