# A flea bite is being blamed for giving a teenager the bubonic plague

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff

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T4 notes

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/Lefteris Pitarakis

An Oregon teenager has caught the bubonic plague.

The terrible disease killed about 50 million Europeans during the 1300s. In the centuries since then, it has never been completely wiped out.

Doctors believe the girl picked up the plague after being bitten by a flea last month during a hunting trip. Fleas are small insects that feed on the blood of animals and birds. They sometimes carry and pass on diseases to humans.

The teen is still in a hospital, but is getting better. No new cases of the disease have been discovered since.

## Plague Is Rare, But Can Be Deadly

"Many people think of the plague as a disease of the past," Oregon public health official Emilio DeBess said. Actually, the plague is still very much around, he said. It is especially seen among wild animals.

"Fortunately, plague remains a rare disease" for people to catch, DeBess said. However, people do need to be careful, he added. They should avoid getting too close to wild animals such as squirrels, chipmunks or rats, who can carry fleas. They should also keep their pets away from such animals.

The bubonic plague typically spreads through flea bites. It can also enter a person's blood through a cut or wound. The first signs of it include fever, headache, chills and weakness.

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

T4 notes

## Most Plague Pops Up In Western States

In the United States overall, there were only 1,006 cases of plague between 1900 and 2012. In modern times, the United States usually has around seven cases of human plague a year. Most of those are in western states.

When bubonic plague is left untreated, the disease can spread to the bloodstream. This usually leads to a fast death.

Once antibiotic medicines were discovered in the last century, the chances of beating the disease became much greater. With antibiotic treatment, usually only about 1 in 10 people with the plague dies.

## Plague Has Traveled The World

There have been three huge outbreaks of bubonic plague. The first was the Justinian Plague, which began in 541 A.D. It killed more than 25 million people during the following 200 years.

The Black Death was next. It started in 1334 in China, then spread along trade routes to Europe. The disease eventually killed 6 out of every 10 Europeans, or about 50 million people.

The final big outbreak is known as the Modern Plague. It also began in China, during the 1860s. The disease appeared in Hong Kong by 1894 and then was spread across the world by rats on ships. During that outbreak scientists first discovered that the plague is often spread by fleas.