The Bubonic Plague

The bubonic plague, or Black Death, was a killer disease that swept repeatedly through many areas of the world. It wiped out two-thirds of the population in some areas of China, destroyed populations of Muslim towns in Southwest Asia, and then decimated one-third of the European population.

**Disease Spreads**

Black rats carried fleas that were infested with a bacillus called *Yersinia pestis*. Because people did not bathe, almost all had fleas and lice. In addition, medieval people threw their garbage and sewage into the streets. These unsanitary streets became breeding grounds for more rats. The fleas carried by rats leapt from person to person, thus spreading the bubonic plague with incredible speed.

**Symptoms of the Bubonic Plague**

- Painful swellings called buboes (BOO•bohz) in the lymph nodes, particularly those in the armpits and groin
- Sometimes purplish or blackish spots on the skin
- Extremely high fever, chills, delirium, and in most cases, death

**Death Tolls, 1300s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Death Toll</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>20–25 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>China, India, other Asians</td>
<td>25 million</td>
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<td>4 million</td>
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**Patterns of Interaction**

The spread of disease has been a very tragic result of cultures interacting with one another across place and time. Such diseases as smallpox and influenza have killed millions of people, sometimes—as with the Aztecs—virtually destroying civilizations.

**Connect to Today**

1. **Hypothesizing** Had people known the cause of the bubonic plague, what might they have done to slow its spread?

2. **Comparing** What diseases of today might be compared to the bubonic plague? Why?