



Plague Backgrounder

Plague is an ancient disease of animals, primarily rodents, which is occasionally transmitted to humans. Humans can become infected by: the bite of infected fleas, handling of infected animals or the bites, scratches and mucus of infected cats. The original home of plague is believed by some to be the central Asiatic plateau and by others to be central Africa.

The first recorded plague epidemics are suggested in early accounts of disease such as that which occurred among the Philistines in 1320 B.C. From that time to the present, progressively more accurate descriptions of plague infections have occurred in various places through recorded history, victims often numbered in the millions.

It is believed that the returning Crusaders introduced plague and its rodent host, the black rat, into northern Europe during the 12th century. The Plague outbreak of the 14th century was named the "Black Death". This epidemic was so severe that between one-half to two-thirds of the people living in Great Britain at that time may have been killed.

In North America, plague has been recognized since the early 1900s when it was introduced into Pacific and Gulf Coast ports. The plague epidemic in San Francisco is the perhaps the best known, but less severe epidemics also occurred in Seattle, New Orleans and Los Angeles. In fact, the last urban plague epidemic in the United States occurred in Los Angeles in 1924 and 1925. This was also the last occasion of person-to-person transmission of plague in this country.

The last major outbreak occurred in Surat, India, in 1994, when an estimated 500,000 persons fled the city in fear of a plague epidemic.