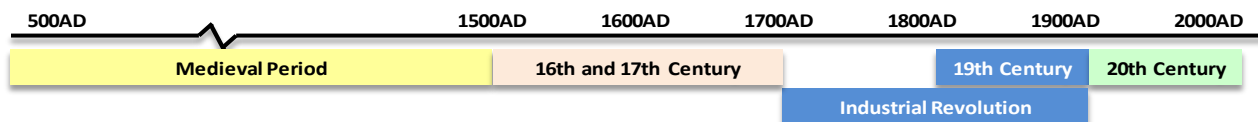


# Knowledge Map: Causes of Illness and Disease

**Summary:** This section of the medicine topic considers the causes of illness and disease and whether they have changed over time. The time periods examined are the medieval period, the 16th and 17th centuries, the 18th and 19th centuries (Industrial Revolution), and the 20th century.



## Medieval Period

**Summary**

The period is marked by a lack of medical knowledge which means causes of illness and disease are misunderstood. Poverty, famine, warfare and a lack of hygiene are the real causes of poverty, yet medieval people sought alternative explanations such as religion.

**Key Knowledge**

1	Problem: Poverty	Peasants made up about 80% of the population and most peasants lived on or near the poverty line. Their diet was mainly made up of bread and pottage (a stew made from beans, peas, oats and herbs, and a little meat and fish of available). Most peasants did not own their own land and lived in the most difficult of circumstances, leaving them prone to illness and disease.
2	Problem: Famine	As peasants were dependent upon the land for their livelihood and for food, poor harvests had a disastrous effect. Throughout the medieval period there was a number of particular bad harvests (1082, 1086 and 1087). However, 1315 is perhaps the harshest famine where torrential rains affected not just that year's harvest but the next three years as well. Poor harvests saw food prices rise which many peasants could not afford.
3	Problem: Medieval Warfare	The medieval period is littered with wars; the most famous being the Hundred Years' War. Warfare during this period was brutal and any injury during battle would lead to infection and death. Warfare also affected civilians as well as soldiers, when towns were besieged and starved until they surrendered. Armies also needed provisions to fight so often food was taken from peasants to prioritise feeding the soldiers.
4	Problem: Accidental Death	Accidents were often common in the medieval period and very often, fatal. Evidence from the past show all manner of accidents leading to death such as buildings collapsing on people, people falling into wells and drowning, and people eating poorly stored foods.
5	Impact of Problems	All of the above problems have an impact upon medieval people in that they become very prone to catching illnesses and diseases. Poor diets and poor living conditions mean you are susceptible to illness and once caught you would likely die due to a lack of understanding of how to treat any diseases.
6	Contemporary Causes	Due to a lack of understanding of what actually caused disease, medieval people sought explanations from elsewhere. Primarily, many medieval people believed that disease was sent by God as a punishment for living an unchristian life. Other explanations included disease being spread by bad smells, or the work of magic, elves and witches, and some believed in the ancient Greek Hippocrates' Theory of the Four Humours.
7	Unhygienic Towns	Many medieval towns were crowded and cramped due to a lack of building regulations. A lack of sanitation in both the homes and the streets meant towns were often filthy. A lack of waste disposal saw all sewage just thrown onto the streets. These unhealthy towns became attractive to vermin who brought with them diseases which were easily spread. The best example of this was the Black Death in 1348.

## 16th and 17th Centuries (Early Modern Period)

**Summary**

This period is marked by similar things to the medieval. Lack of medical knowledge and science led to little advances in understanding causes. Mortality Bills from 1665 show that the plague was still rampant.

**Key Knowledge**

8	1665: Return of the Plague	The return of the plague in 1665 demonstrates that the causes of illness and disease had not changed much from medieval times. The reason it was able to return and spread so easily was due to the unhygienic and unsanitary conditions people lived in.
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## 18th and 19th Centuries (Industrial Revolution)

**Summary**

This period is marked by the shift to a more urbanised society but the same causes of illness and disease remain: unhygienic cities and a lack of what actually causes disease. Common diseases were all associated with poor living conditions.

**Key Knowledge**

9	Industrialisation of Britain	The 18th and 19th centuries saw Britain move from an agricultural based economy to an industrial one. With this move, Britain's landscape changed with cities emerging as much of the population sought jobs in urban areas. This coupled with a huge growth in the size of the population meant Britain changed forever but with it came many problems. Fundamentally, living conditions did not improve despite the country becoming more wealthy.
10	Unhygienic Cities	As many people flocked to the cities for work, the cities grew at a phenomenally quick rate. Cheap housing was put up making the cities crowded and cramped. Due to a lack of building regulations, the homes were inadequately built. Often families would share just one room, and whole streets would share communal toilets. These conditions allowed diseases to spread very easily, often with devastating effect.
11	Growth of Infectious Diseases	The diseases that were prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries have their roots in poverty. People lived in overcrowded housing with little ventilation; they had no clean water supply, and their diet was poor. Widespread and common diseases such as bronchitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis and diphtheria are all linked to poor living conditions.

## 20th Century

**Summary**

This period is the most different to all the others. This period is marked by the removal of old killer diseases, better sanitation and cleanliness but the rise of new lifestyle diseases such as AIDS and cancer.

**Key Knowledge**

12	Improvements in Living Standards	For various reasons, living standards have improved in the 20th century. This is mainly due to an understanding of that bacteria causes disease and that poor living conditions are linked to illness and disease. There are strict laws about housing, living conditions and how cities are built, and all enforced by the government. Whilst poverty has not been eradicated, the living standards of the vast majority of the population have improved considerably.
13	Increase in Life Expectancy	The impact of improved living conditions has seen a rise in life expectancy. Prior to the 20th century, life expectancy had not changed that much. It was about 35 to 40 in the medieval period and it was about the same by the 20th century. Improved living standards would see life expectancy rise to nearly 80 years.
14	Growth of 'Lifestyle' Diseases	As life expectancy increased and old 'killer' diseases of the 19th century eradicated, new diseases have merged. These new diseases are unlike previous killer diseases as they are not associated with poverty but to lifestyle. Changes in diets and lifestyle choices such as smoking and drinking, have seen diseases such as cancer and heart disease emerge. These diseases are generally, but not exclusively, connected to old age.
15	Case Study 1: Spanish Flu (1918)	Despite huge advances in medical knowledge and living standards, some old diseases still remain and are still fatal. The best example of this is influenza. From 1918 to 1919 a particularly aggressive strain of flu affected large parts of the world, particularly war-torn Europe. Named after its place of origin, Spain, the Spanish Flu killed an estimated 20-40 million people worldwide - more than those that died in the First World War.
16	Case Study 2: AIDS	Another example of a lifestyle disease, other than Cancer and Heart Disease, is the emergence of AIDS. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is a new disease that is still incurable. It is a viral infection that attacks the immune system. It is estimated that 40 million people have died from it and another 40 million are living with it. It is entirely preventable making it very different from previous diseases.

### Key Words and Definitions

Poverty	the state of being extremely poor
Famine	extreme scarcity of food
Sanitation	conditions related to public health such as clean water and sewage
Plague	a highly contagious bacterial disease characterised by fever
Disease	an abnormal condition that affects the structure or function of the body
Epidemic	a widespread occurrence of an infectious disease in a community
Influenza	a highly contagious disease, commonly known as the flu, caused by the influenza virus. Still no known cure