In big disease news this week a 16-year-old girl has been diagnosed with bubonic plague after a camping trip in central Oregon. State health officials believe she had likely been bitten by a plague-carrying flea.

Plague is commonly thought of as a scourge of the past, as in the middle ages. Indeed, during the middle decades of the 14th century, the "black death" swept across Europe and the Mediterranean regions, killing somewhere between one-quarter and one-third of the entire population, which may have kept the "Dark Ages" going for another century.

But that is ancient history. Yet people are still surprised it occurs in modern day America. The U.S. still has between two and fifteen documented cases each year, generally found in the southwest (N. Mexico and Arizona), but California and Oregon do report some as well. Caused by the bacterium *Yersinia* (formerly *Pasteurella*) *pestis*, only three deaths have occurred here over the past seven years. As in days of yore, it is typically spread by infected fleas who got their bugs from infected rodents, especially rats.

Plague symptoms typically develop in one to four days after exposure, and include fever, chills, headache, weakness and a bloody or watery cough. Bubonic plague is the most common form. Its symptoms are high fever, lethargy and swollen lymph nodes, most commonly in the neck and under the jaw.

Infected lymph nodes may spontaneously abscess and drain. The less common pneumonic form is characterized by cough, often with blood as well as pus. It is treatable with several antibiotics if caught before lethal lung or systemic complications occur.

During the ravages of the Black Plague in Europe, the myth of Vampirism also began, likely due to superstitions involving burying "corpses" of sick plague victims who were coughing up blood but
had not yet died. Thus, the "post-mortem" movements and bloody mouth of these desperate cases led simple-minded peasants to believe the "undead" had been feasting on their neighbors blood, protecting them from actually dying.

Sometimes, before burying an apparently deceased plague victim, the gravediggers would place a stone in the corpse's mouth to prevent future blood-sucking.

So on that note, Happy Halloween to one and all! But do try to avoid vampires, werewolves, and especially infected rats!

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