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## Epidemics & Plagues

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## What is an Epidemic?

An epidemic is generally a widespread disease that affects many individuals in a population. An epidemic may be restricted to one locale or may even be global (pandemic). An outbreak of a disease is defined as being epidemic, however, not by how many members or what proportion of the population it infects but by how fast it is growing. When each infected individual is infecting more than one other individual, so that the number of infected individuals is growing exponentially, the disease is in an epidemic state. Thus even if the number of people affected is small, the phenomenon may still be called an epidemic, although for small epidemics the term "outbreak" is more often used.

Some examples of historical epidemics include the Black Death, or bubonic plague, of Mediaeval Europe, the influenza (flu) epidemic concurring with the end of World War I, and the current AIDS epidemic.



## Armageddon

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Every infection is a race between the microbes and the host. The microbe, following the indelible rules of evolution, strives to survive and reproduce, while the host's immune system mounts a warlike defense designed to find, destroy, and eliminate it. An agent that kills its host quickly cannot be expected to survive long enough to reproduce. Thus excessive virulence is not selected for in evolution. Germs, which can reproduce and be passed from one host to another, are favored.

### **The Black Death**

The Black Death (also The Bubonic Plague, and more recently The Black Plague) was a devastating epidemic in Europe in the 14th century which is estimated to have killed about **a third** of the population. Most scientists believe that the Black Death was an outbreak of bubonic plague, a dreaded disease that has spread in pandemic form several times through history. The plague is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* which is spread by fleas with the help of animals like the black rat - what we would call today the sewer rat. Sometimes, the term "Black Death" is used for all outbreaks of plague and epidemics.

### **Influenza**

...or as it is commonly known, the flu - is a contagious disease caused by an RNA virus of the orthomyxoviridae family. The name comes from the old medical belief in unfavourable astrological influences as the cause of the disease. Influenza's effects are much more severe and last longer than those of the cold. Recovery takes about one to two weeks. Influenza can be deadly, especially for the weak, old or chronically ill. Some flu pandemics have killed millions of people, for example the "Spanish Flu" pandemic of 1918–1919, which is believed to have killed more people in total than World War I.

### **AIDS**

AIDS (the acronym meaning Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and occasionally written as Aids) is a human disease characterized by progressive destruction of the body's immune system. It is believed by the overwhelming majority of medical opinion to result from infection with HIV, the Human Immunodeficiency [Virus](#) (which is actually a [retrovirus](#)).

AIDS was first noticed among homosexual men and needle drug users in the 1980s. By the 1990s the syndrome had become a global epidemic and in 2004, 58% of those with AIDS were women. While homosexual men continue to suffer higher per capita AIDS rates, the majority of victims are currently heterosexual women, men, and children in developing countries.

AIDS is currently considered incurable; where treatments are

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unavailable (mostly in poorer countries) most sufferers die within a few years of diagnosis. In the developed countries, treatment has improved greatly over the past decade, and people have lived with AIDS for ten to twenty years.

HIV is transmitted by bodily fluids, such as blood, semen and vaginal secretions. It causes disease by infecting CD4+ T cells, a type of leukocyte (white blood cell) that normally co-ordinates the immune response to infection and cancer. When a person's CD4+ T cell count decreases sufficiently he or she is prone to a range of diseases that a healthy person's body is normally able to fight. These diseases include cancers and opportunistic infections, which are usually the cause of death in persons with AIDS. HIV also infects brain cells, causing some neurological disorders.

### Smallpox

Smallpox is one of the most devastating of all infectious diseases. It is highly infectious, kills 30% of victims and can spread in any climate or season. It is carried in the air, making it extremely contagious and able to contaminate many people in a short time. Smallpox used to ravage the world but following a vaccination program in 1980 the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that it had been eradicated, so countries stopped vaccination. In the same year Russia started to produce large quantities, successfully adapting it for use on bombs or missiles. Russia's industry is still capable of producing vast amounts of smallpox, enough to kill hundreds of millions. Vaccination ceased in 1972 in the US - everyone born after that date has no immunity.

### Cholera

The disease proceeds in possibly three stages (a) Invasion: at the end of the incubation period the symptoms are malaise, headache, severe diarrhea resulting in the so-called "rice water stool," (which derives its characteristic whitish color from intestinal tissue which is exfoliated (shed) and excreted along with innumerable Vibrios), anorexia, and a slight fever.

This severe diarrhea can be as high as one liter per hour. The resulting loss of fluid and the accompanying electrolyte imbalance can lead to hypovolemic shock, renal failure, and cardiac failure. (b) Collapse: circulation is almost completely arrested, accelerated respiration, weak pulse, decreased systolic blood pressure, diminished or no urine output.

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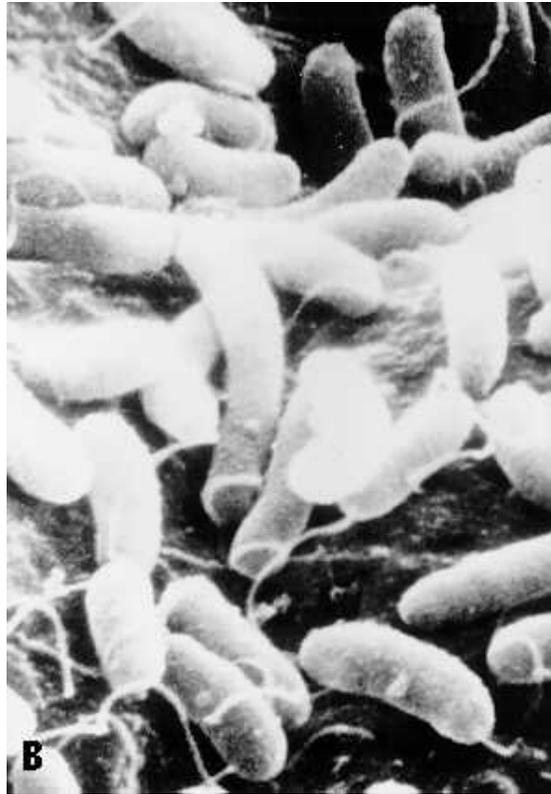
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This stage lasts from a few hours to one or two days. The mind remains clear until just before death, when coma occurs. Death follows shortly thereafter. Death can follow the onset of symptoms in little as six hours. (c) Reaction: sometimes, even when the grim reaper is about to claim victory, vomiting ceases, diarrhea becomes less frequent and less watery, and convalescence follows.

**How could they be distributed?**

There are many ways in which they could be distributed. Russia developed techniques using missiles and bombs to spread the pathogens. Anthrax was recently deployed using the post. Al Queda attempted to acquire crop-dusting planes, which could be used to spread pathogens to millions. They could be released from conventional planes. Terrorists could release them in ventilation systems to spread them across a building. However they are spread, infectious pathogens could soon be passed to others, leading to casualties thousands of times greater than the original number infected.

**Why are they so dangerous?**

If any of them were to be turned into weapons, there are many reasons they could be potentially more devastating than nuclear

weapons,

- [Nuclear](#) and [chemical weapons](#) only kill people in an isolated area, meaning that large numbers have to be used to kill most of an enemy's population. [Biological weapons](#) can kill thousands with a microscopic amount.
- They are virtually undetectable before being deployed, allowing them to be transported into hostile countries by car or plane, as well as by missile.
- They cause no damage to buildings, allowing a country to eliminate its enemies and move in to take control of undamaged cities.
- They can kill far more people than any other type of weapon.
- Even if only a few die, they cause terror within an enemy's population.
- They are extremely cheap compared to other weapons. A vast arsenal can be grown from one sample. This is especially beneficial for terrorists.
- They can be acquired with terrifying ease. Using only a false letterhead and credit card, a man in America was able to acquire a large amount of Bubonic Plague. He was later found to be a member of a white supremacist organisation, had he not been caught another outbreak of plague could have occurred.

This would instill fear - Slow economies to a crawl - and cause mass scale panic. Surely you see the dangers involved in people 'playing god' with these dangerous diseases.

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