

Did ideas about disease change in the Middle Ages?

In the Middle Ages most doctors followed the ideas of Galen. Like him they believed that illness was caused by an imbalance in the body's humours. Even *Bald's Leechbook* - a book of Anglo-Saxon - remedies contains advice based on Galen's works.

SOURCE 1 From Bald's Leechbook AD900. The title itself is a reference to using leeches to bleed patients.

“ Where a great hiccup may come from ...

It comes from a very chilled stomach or even from an overheated one, or from the stomach being too full or too much emptiness, or from evil humours tearing and scarifying the stomach.

Cough has a varied approach: sometimes it comes from great heat; sometimes from great cold; sometimes from great humidity; sometimes from great dryness.”

However, doctors in the Middle Ages also had ideas about illness which were different from Galen's.

The most powerful was their belief that **God and the Devil** influenced health. Major epidemics such as the Black Death were seen as God's punishment for people's sins. Even lesser problems, such as the death of a child, might be blamed on the sin of the parents. They therefore believed that God could heal people and that the King (because he was appointed by God) could heal diseases such as SCROFULA, just by touching a sufferer.

Astrology also became very important in the Middle Ages. Trained doctors studied star charts because they believed that the movement of the planets affected people's health.

Another very different medieval idea was that **worms** were connected to illness. These are some of the chapter headings from *Bald's Leechbook*:

- Remedies if a worm eat a tooth
- Remedies for worms in children's intestines
- Remedies for worms that eat a man's flesh.

When doctors examined the faeces of sick people they often saw worms. It seemed obvious to link these to whatever illness the person was suffering from.

Common sense also told them that there was a link between **dirt and disease** although they did not know what the link was. So during attacks of plague people in cities cleared rubbish from the streets.