Coronavirus vs Black Death: Which is worse? COVID-19 or the bubonic plague?
By Katie Sewell

Since the latest coronavirus was discovered in Wuhan, China in December 2019, more than two million people have been infected according to John Hopkins University. As of April 16, 138,101 people have died. The World Health Organization declared the latest COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic last month, and most of the world has implemented strict social distancing measures to tackle the virus.

There is not a set definition for a pandemic, but a virus is thought to become a pandemic when it becomes prevalent across the world.

Coronavirus had previously been classified as an epidemic, as the majority of coronavirus cases were first reported in China.

But the rapidly increasing number of cases in other countries, such as Iran, South Korea and Italy, meant the virus' status was upgraded.

So how does the COVID-19 outbreak compare to one of the worst outbreaks in human history, the Black Death?

What was the Black Death?

The Black Death was an epidemic of plague which swept through Europe in the 14th century.

As far as we know, the Black Death originated in China, before spreading through the Middle East to Europe through trade routes in Italy.

The plague dramatically reduced the European population, with some experts predicting up to 60 percent of the population were wiped out.

The plague spread to humans by vermin, like rats and mice.

The bacterium Yersinia pestis causes a number of plagues, and is usually spread by fleas on animals which can pass on the bacteria.

Plague still exists today, but it is now better understood how to effectively treat the disease.

Much of the world has witnessed a plague epidemic at some point, but most cases in the modern day occur in Africa.

The three most endemic countries for plague today are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar and Peru.
Is COVID-19 worse than the Black Death?

At this time, the latest COVID-19 outbreak looks to have a lower fatality rate than the Black Death.

According to the World Health Organization, the Black Death of the 14th century killed more than 50 million people.

The bubonic plague, the most common form of plague, was characterised by swollen lymph nodes or ‘buboes’.

People infected with the bubonic plague had a 50 percent chance of death.

Of the 2,078,277 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 138,101 people have died as of April 16.

Thousands of people have recovered from the virus, and although opinions differ, most experts believe the latest coronavirus has a low fatality rate.

The UK’s Chief Medical Officer, Chris Whitty, stated last month the fatality rate looks likely to be one percent or lower.

Other outbreaks of recent years appear to have had much higher fatality rates than COVID-19.

The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 is thought to have had a fatality rate of some 11 percent.

The Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreak of 2012 had an estimated fatality rate of 34 percent.

In comparison to the Black Death of the 14th century, the latest COVID-19 outbreak has also caused fewer deaths.

It is also the case that less people have been infected with COVID-19 than the plague.