People in the middle ages had a surprising knowledge of how the human body worked and many cures were based around plants and herbs which are still used nowadays.

Fear and superstition played a large part in medieval medicine. Many people believed that an illness was a punishment from God and a cure would only come about through divine intervention. A patient might seek a cure through prayer or going on pilgrimage, rather than consulting a healer or physician.

Imbalance of Humours Theory in Medieval Medicine

The Hippocratic theory of the four humours of the body was to characterise medicine during the middle ages. Most doctors believed that illnesses were caused by an imbalance of humours in the body, which had to be restored to bring the patient back to health.

This theory came from the teachings of ancient Greeks such as Hippocrates and Galen. Their texts referred to the four humours of the body – blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These humours were associated with elements of the natural world: Black Bile - earth; Phlegm - water; Blood - air; Yellow bile - fire. It was believed that the four seasons of the year could affect the health of a patient and some physicians used astrology as part of their treatment, believing that the movements of the moon and stars affected when a cure was most effective.

Bloodletting and Surgery in the Middle Ages

Blood letting was a common cure, which was used for many years after the medieval period. A patient's vein was cut, or leeches allowed to drink blood from the affected part of the body.

Although in some ways during this period, basic medical knowledge was lacking, physicians had a good understanding of how the human body worked, knowing, for example, that the spinal cord controlled muscular functions.

Some operations were carried out, such as removing cataracts from the eyes, amputations and bone setting following a break. Attempts were made to use anaesthetics, but these could be fatal, as they often included poisons such as hemlock or deadly nightshade.

The Use of Plants and Herbs in Medieval Medicine

Many of the plants and herbs which were grown for cures in the middle ages are still in use today. *The Doctrine of Signatures*, written in AD64 by Dioscorides, claimed that a plant to be used to heal part of the body would mimic that body part in its own shape. For example, the leaves of the lungwort plant which resemble a human lung and were to treat breathing disorders.

Most of the plants and herbs used in medicine could be grown in an ordinary medieval garden. Plants were often multi-purpose, something which could be useful for anyone working in a small place. For example, lavender could be used to heal burns, to ease headaches and was also used in cooking and as a household freshener.

Healers in Medieval Times

Various medical practitioners worked informally and were called upon when their services were required. These workers were generally unregulated and received no formal training. They included midwives, dentists and apothecaries. Some were attached to noble households, but most carried out their trade alongside another job, such as butcher or barber.

Although medical books were written in Latin, there was also an oral tradition where cures were passed around a community or from one generation to the next. Unlike other areas of medieval work, women played their part in healing the sick, working as midwives, herbal healers and even now and again as physicians.

Disease in the Middle Ages

The reasons why diseases spread were largely unknown and so bad hygiene and people living in close proximity could cause diseases such as the black death to spread at a pace which must have been terrifying.

Hospitals, many of which were attached to monasteries, were places where infections could spread, due to unclean medical instruments and the lack of regulations for health and hygiene. Many people had a fear of hospitals and physicians, believing that anyone who went into hospital would not come out alive. For them, using their own plant or herb cures seemed a safer option.

Death and disease

DEATH WAS EVER-PRESENT for people living in the Middle Ages. Disease was rife in the dirty, overcrowded streets of medieval towns and cities, and medical knowledge was limited. The average life expectancy was about 30 years. Frequent wars and famines claimed thousands of lives at a time. The most catastrophic event of all was the Black Death. Carried by black rats, it was brought back from Asia by Italian sailors. The plague was deadly and highly contagious. Symptoms included black and blue blotches on the body. No cure was ever found. It swept through Europe between 1347 and 1350. By the end of 1348, at least a third of the entire population of Europe had died.

FEVERFEW
Strong-smelling feverfew was used to treat headaches and to assist in childbirth.

MARJORAM
Marjoram was used to make healing poultices to place on bruises and swellings.

LEMON BALM
This plant was seen as a kind of magic elixir that could cure serious illnesses. It was also used for fevers and colds because it causes sweating.

LUNGWORT
Because the shape of its leaves resembled lungs, lungwort was used to treat chest disorders.

HERBAL MEDICINE
Medieval medicine was based mainly on folklore and superstition rather than scientific observation. For exampl many medical handbooks recommended that healing her should be picked on magical days of the year, such as Midsummer's Eve. However, many of the herbs used in medieval times are still employed by herbalists today
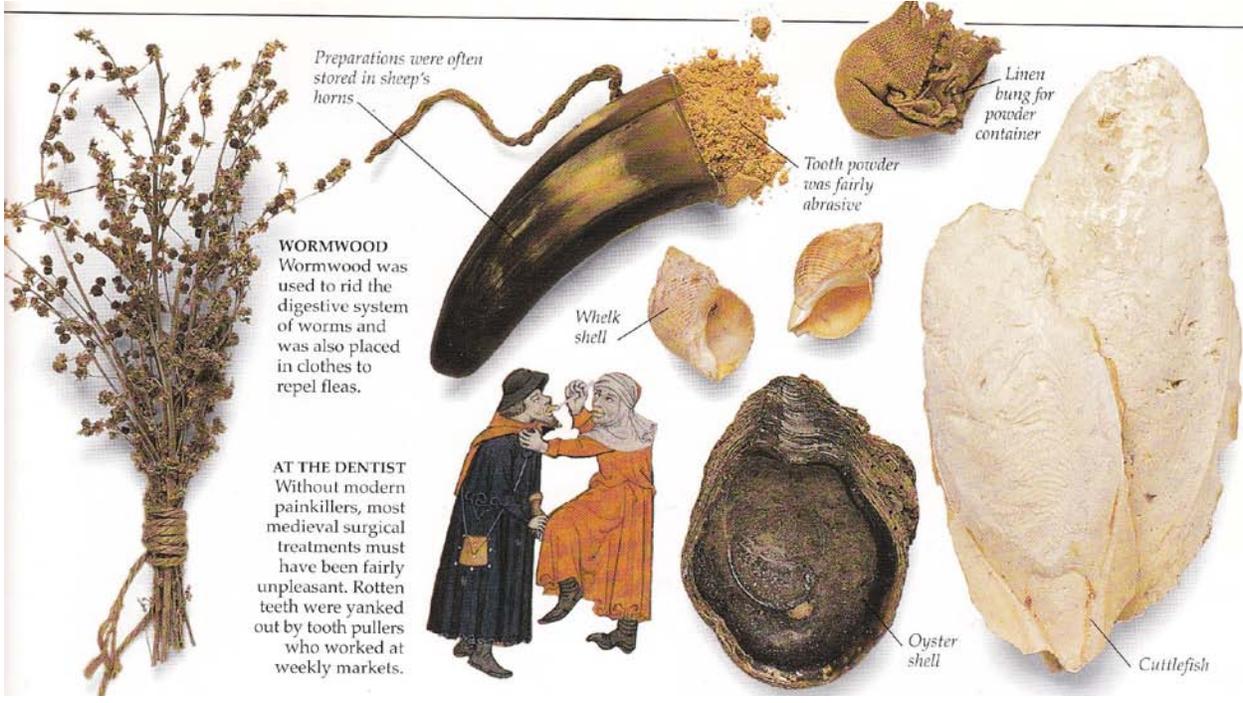
Preparations were often stored in sheep's horns

Linen bung for powder container

Tooth powder was fairly abrasive

WORMWOOD
Wormwood was used to rid the digestive system of worms and was also placed in clothes to repel fleas.

Whelk shell

AT THE DENTIST
Without modern painkillers, most medieval surgical treatments must have been fairly unpleasant. Rotten teeth were yanked out by tooth pullers who worked at weekly markets.

Oyster shell

Cuttlefish