

Fears super-powerful Black Death strain could hit Australia

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Experts have warned a disease which killed 50 million people across Europe in the 1300s could make a return, and the result might be even more devastating.

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There's fears the Black Death could return.

The state should be on the alert for the return of the Black Death that killed up to 50 million people in the 1300s, a Queensland infectious disease expert has warned.

As the risk of a super-powerful, antibiotic-resistant strain of the infection rises, international scientists are working on a vaccine and a case of the Black Death was confirmed in Oregon in the US last year.

The Black Death or Bubonic plague spread through Europe like wildfire as there were no antibiotics available to kill the bug but in 2025 it is antibiotic resistance that is the problem.

Professor Paul Griffin said Australia should always be prepared for the return of ancient diseases.

“As people travel internationally we have to remember that these infections aren’t geographically confined,” Prof Griffin told The Courier-Mail.

A new vaccine is being developed by the same scientists that developed the Oxford AstraZeneca jab for Covid.

The vaccine has gone through clinical trials and has so far shown a safe and successful immune response to the Black Death pathogen. The vaccine will be stockpiled ready for any emergence of a superstrain.

“We have a great health system in Australia but it is important that any hints of the return of such an infection is stamped out as quickly as possible. We should always remain vigilant to ensure these diseases do not infiltrate,” Professor Griffin said.

The Black Death was one of the most devastating disease outbreaks in history. The 14th century strain was caused by the yersinia pestis bacteria. The disease is called the Black Death due to body parts turning gangrene black.

The plague finally ended through severe quarantine protocols. Many infected people moved from areas where they could live in isolation. In 2019 cats with the plague were discovered in the US.

As Queensland’s vaccination rates drop fears rise that polio could make a return.

Vaccination rates for polio have plummeted in some parts of the state — falling 12 per cent in Noosa between 2020 and 2023. The state is dealing with an explosion of whooping cough cases with almost 15,000 cases recorded in 2024.

A total of 90.8 per cent of one year olds were vaccinated against whooping cough as of September 2024 — down from 94.4 per cent at the end of 2018.

The portion of pregnant women vaccinated against whooping cough has have also fallen, from 77.2 per cent in 2020 to 70.7 per cent in 2023.