

Evidence A: Bad Bread Theory

Is it possible that the girls had contracted an illness that caused their strange behaviors and led to the witchcraft accusations? It might seem unlikely, but let's examine the evidence! Some historians believe the girls contracted *ergotism*, a form of poisoning caused by the ingestion of rye grain containing the fungus known as ergot.

Rye is the most common grain that can become infected with ergot. Once infected, the rye grain develops dark, hard, and elongated structures (see picture below). The ergot fungus needs warm and damp conditions, and it is believed that the marsh-like conditions in and around Salem were a haven for the ergot fungus. Most people in Salem relied on rye breads to feed themselves as vegetables and meat were scarce during harsh winters.



Images above: ergot fungus on rye, an 1800s drawing of people baking rye bread.

Once eaten, the ergot fungus begins to wreak havoc on the human body. Europeans living in the Middle Ages actually nicknamed the early symptoms of ergot poisoning as “Holy Fire” (“holy” comes from the belief that it was a punishment from God and “fire” comes from the burning sensations that shortly followed consumption). Extreme forms of ergotism can lead to severe infections in the arms and legs, however the most common symptoms include seizures, convulsions, and hallucinations. But, is it possible this caused the witchcraft allegations?

The afflicted girls complained in court about pinching, biting, or burning sensations, all of which are consistent with the symptoms associated with ergotism. Is it possible that the afflicted girls had ergotism and accused others of witchcraft because of their strong belief in witches? Why did nobody else experience the same sensations? What do you think?

Please fill in the questions below:

1. What is ergot, how does it grow, and where does it grow?

2. What symptoms might one experience if ergot was consumed?

3. What factors point to ergot poisoning as the reason behind the witchcraft accusations?

4. What do you think? Are you convinced the ergot caused the hysteria? Why or Why Not?