



Leprosy (Hansen's Disease)

What is leprosy?

Leprosy is a chronic bacterial disease that usually affects the skin and nerves in the hands and feet. It is rare in the United States.

Who can get leprosy?

In the U.S., leprosy is rare. People may be at risk for the disease if they live in a country where the disease is widespread (<http://www.cdc.gov/leprosy/exposure/index.html>) or if they have prolonged close contact with people who have untreated Hansen's disease. Most adults face no risk at all. Studies have shown that 95% of all adults are naturally unable to get the disease, even if they're exposed to the bacteria.

How does leprosy spread?

The bacteria that cause Hansen's disease can spread from person to person. People can get sick when they are exposed to droplets from coughs or sneezes or nasal secretions from an infected person. Some armadillos in the southern United States are naturally infected with Hansen's disease. While it's possible for you to get the disease from an armadillo, the risk is very low.

What are the symptoms of leprosy?

Symptoms mainly affect the skin, nerves, and mucous membranes (the soft, moist areas just inside the body's openings). The disease can cause:

- Skin lesions that may be faded/discolored
- Growths on the skin
- Thick, stiff or dry skin
- Severe pain
- Numbness on affected areas of the skin
- Muscle weakness or paralysis (especially in the hands and feet)
- Eye problems that may lead to blindness
- Enlarged nerves (especially those around the elbow and knee)
- A stuffy nose
- Nosebleeds
- Ulcers on the soles of feet

Loss of feeling or sensation can also occur. When loss of sensation occurs, injuries (such as burns or fractures) may go unnoticed.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

It may take 2-10 years before signs and symptoms appear.

How long is a person able to spread leprosy?

Infected people can spread the disease if they are untreated. As soon as patients start treatment, however, they are no longer able to spread the disease.

What is the treatment for leprosy?

People with leprosy may be treated for 6 months to 2 years with a combination of antibiotics. Take the antibiotics until your healthcare provider says treatment is complete (otherwise you may get sick again).

How can leprosy be prevented?

The best way to prevent the spread of leprosy is to have those infected with the illness receive early diagnosis and treatment. Those in close contact with a person who has leprosy should seek medical advice from their healthcare provider.