



Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)

What is Hansen's disease?

Hansen's disease, formerly called leprosy, is a chronic infectious disease caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae* (*M. leprae*). Hansen's disease is still common in many parts of the world. In the United States, the disease is rare, and the majority of reported cases are immigrants or refugees exposed in their native countries. However, locally acquired Hansen's disease is reported in several states including California, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Texas, and New York City.

How is Hansen's disease spread?

The exact method by which Hansen's disease spreads is not clearly understood. However, most investigators think the bacteria are spread from one person to another through respiratory droplets. This might happen when someone with the disease coughs or sneezes. This can release droplets into the air. It might also happen if you are exposed to other nasal fluids (also known as secretions). Droplets and other secretions can contain the bacteria that cause Hansen's disease.

Who is at risk for Hansen's disease?

You may be at risk for the disease if you live in a country where the disease is widespread. Such countries include: Angola, Brazil, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Federated States of Micronesia, India, Kiribati, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nepal, Republic of Marshall Islands, and United Republic of Tanzania. You also may be at risk if you are in prolonged close contact with people who have untreated Hansen's disease. If they have not been treated, you could be exposed to the bacteria that cause Hansen's disease. As soon as patients start treatment, however, they are no longer able to spread the disease.

Most adults around the world, however, might face no risk at all. That's because evidence shows that 95% of all adults are naturally unable to get the disease, even if they're exposed to the bacteria that causes it.

What are the symptoms of Hansen's disease?

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, 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, and ulcers on the soles of feet. Since Hansen's disease affects the nerves, loss of feeling or sensation can occur.

Is there a treatment for Hansen's disease?

Hansen's disease is treatable with antibiotics prescribed by a physician. Early diagnosis and treatment is key in preventing severe, permanent disease and controlling spread of the disease. Persons with Hansen's disease can become noninfectious within days following appropriate treatment.

What can be done to prevent Hansen's disease?

Efforts to prevent the spread of Hansen's disease should start with ensuring the rapid diagnosis and appropriate antibiotic treatment of persons with the disease. Persons having direct contact with someone who is still contagious should avoid handling items potentially soiled with fluids from the nose and respiratory tract. Hands should also be routinely washed. Household members and close contacts to an untreated case of Hansen's disease should receive annual checkups by a doctor for at least five years.