

# IDRS Infectious Disease Reporting System

Disease Reporting 24 Hours a Day

Columbus Public Health and Franklin County Public Health

## LEPROSY

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is caused by very slow-growing bacteria that infect the skin and nerves. The disease is often mistakenly identified as the "leprosy of the Old Testament". Hansen's disease is not highly contagious and 95 percent of the human population has a natural immunity.

### Symptoms

It may take 2 to 10 years after a person is exposed for symptoms of leprosy to appear. Early signs include:

- Pale or slightly red patches of skin or a rash on the trunk or extremities. The rash may occur in the same places on both sides of the body, and may develop reddish bumps and dry, thick skin.
- Decreased feeling in the area of the rash, or in the hands or feet
- Nasal congestion or nosebleeds
- Thinning of the eyebrows or eyelashes
- Swollen nerves or pain and weakness in the hands and feet
- If untreated, nerve damage can result in crippling of hands and feet and blindness.

### Transmission

- Although the mode of transmission of leprosy remains uncertain, most investigators think that the disease is spread from person to person in droplets from the mouth and nose.
- However, it is not spread by casual contact such as shaking hands, sitting next to someone on a bus, or sitting together at a meal. Leprosy is far less contagious than other infectious diseases.
- Since so many people are naturally immune, the ability of a person to get leprosy may depend partly on genetics. Therefore, those at greatest risk are the family of a person who has the disease, especially children, brothers or sisters, or parents of the ill person. Family members tend to have more contact with the person and may have some genetic susceptibility. A spouse is the least at-risk family member, possibly because they don't share genes with the sick person.
- Most cases of leprosy respond to treatment and become non-infectious after a few doses of medicine.

### Treatment

- Your health care provider can make the diagnosis by doing a test called a skin biopsy. However, most health care providers in the U.S. lack experience with this disease, and don't think of diagnosing leprosy.
- Leprosy is curable using antibiotics. Treatment may take 1 or two years, depending on the form of disease. Patients with mild forms of leprosy can sometimes self-heal, but it is still best to seek treatment.
- Early treatment helps prevent many complications like loss of feeling or disfigurement of hands and feet.
- Some patients experience what is called a reaction after treatment has begun. This is a response of the immune system to dead or dying bacteria and can cause worsening of the rash or nerve pain.
- People with leprosy in the U.S. can receive medications at no cost through their own doctor or through the [National Hansen's Disease Programs Ambulatory Care Clinic](#) closest to them.

### Prevention

- Household contacts of people with leprosy should have a thorough physical examination annually for five years. If they develop a questionable skin rash, they should notify their healthcare providers and have the skin rash biopsied to determine whether or not leprosy is present.

**All information is general in nature and is not intended to be used as a substitute for appropriate professional advice.**



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