

Leprosy

Fact sheet

What is leprosy?

Leprosy (also known as Hansen's disease) is an infection caused by bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae*. These bacteria grow very slowly, so it may take several years after infection to get symptoms of leprosy. Leprosy can be cured if it is identified and treated with antibiotic medicines.

In Australia, leprosy is now rare. It is still common in parts of tropical and subtropical Asia, Africa, Central and South America, some Pacific countries, and parts of the United States of America.

What are the symptoms?

Leprosy mainly affects skin and nerves, but it can also affect mucous membranes (the soft tissue just inside your nose, mouth, middle ear, and other body openings).

Symptoms of the skin or mucous membranes may include:

- Growths (lumps or bumps) on the skin
- Discoloured patches
- Stuffy nose or nose bleeds

Symptoms of the nerves may include:

- Muscle weakness or paralysis, particularly in hands and feet
- Loss of feeling or abnormal skin sensations
- Damage to the nerves of the eye causing blindness.

How is it spread?

Leprosy is thought to spread in droplets from the nose and mouth of an infectious person. It does not spread easily. To spread, an infectious person must be in close and frequent contact with another person.

Who is most at risk?

Most people who are exposed to leprosy do not develop the disease. People who have been in close contact with a person who has leprosy for a long period of time are at greatest risk. For example, people who have lived in a household with a person who has leprosy for 3 months or more.

Is there a vaccine available?

There is no vaccine to prevent leprosy. The vaccine against tuberculosis, bacille Calmette-Guerin (BCG), may provide some protection against leprosy. This is because the organism that causes leprosy is closely related to the one that causes tuberculosis. BCG vaccination is recommended for children aged less than 5 years old who live with a person with leprosy.

How is it diagnosed?

A doctor can take a sample (biopsy) of skin, nerve, or lining of the nose for testing and diagnosis.

How is it treated?

Leprosy can be treated with antibiotics. Most people will need 2 to 3 types of antibiotics taken at the same time. These antibiotics usually need to be taken for between 1 and 2 years. To cure leprosy, people must take all medicines prescribed by their doctor. Early treatment is important to reduce the risk of long-term problems such as permanent nerve damage or deformity. People with leprosy are no longer infectious shortly after starting treatment.

People who have been in close contact (for example, lived in the same house for 3 months or more) with someone with leprosy may be prescribed a single dose of an antibiotic, so they don't become sick with leprosy.

What is the public health response?

Laboratories and doctors must notify cases of leprosy to their local Public Health Unit.

All investigations and treatment for leprosy patients and their contacts are provided free of charge at NSW Health facilities.

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055.