

Leprosy

FACTSHEET

Hansen's Disease

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What is Leprosy?

Leprosy is a chronic bacterial disease of the skin, nerves in the hands and feet, and in some cases, the lining of the nose. There are two forms of leprosy, tuberculoid and lepromatous.

Who gets Leprosy?

Leprosy can affect anyone. The disease is rarely seen in children less than three. Newly recognized cases in the United States are mostly in immigrants and refugees whose disease was acquired in their native countries.

What are the symptoms of Leprosy?

The symptoms of the tuberculoid form of leprosy are the presence of a few well-defined skin lesions that are numb. The symptoms of lepromatous leprosy are a chronically stuffy nose and many skin lesions and nodules on both sides of the body. The individual usually cannot feel touch or pain at these lesions.

How is Leprosy spread?

It is unclear how the leprosy germ is spread, but household and prolonged close contact with an infected person is thought to be important. It is believed that the germ is spread from person to person through the respiratory tract.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of leprosy can take a few months to years to appear after exposure to the germ. It usually takes about four years for tuberculoid leprosy symptoms and about eight years for lepromatous leprosy symptoms to appear.

Is a person with Leprosy contagious?

It is likely that a person with leprosy is contagious for approximately three months after starting treatment.

How is Leprosy treated?

There are several drugs available to treat persons with leprosy. They are usually given in combination and must be taken for an extended period of time.

Should a person with Leprosy be excluded from work or school?

Yes, until the person has been on the appropriate drug treatment. Once considered noninfectious they may return to work or school.

Can Leprosy be prevented?

The best way to prevent leprosy is the early diagnosis and treatment of people who are infected. For household contacts, immediate and annual examinations should be done for at least five years after last contact with a person who was infectious.

Want more information?

Information about leprosy and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-5842/9371.

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