

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. The bacteria likely enter the body through the nose or possibly through a break in the skin. It may also be possible for children to be infected prior to birth, from an infected mother. Nine banded armadillos can also be infected with *M. leprae* and some reports suggest they may be capable of spreading the disease to humans.

Who is at risk for Hansen's disease?

Persons who live with or have long-term close contact with someone who has untreated Hansen's disease appear to be at a greater risk of getting the disease. Living in a country where Hansen's disease is known to regularly occur also increases the risk.

What are the symptoms of Hansen's disease?

Hansen's disease can cause a wide variety of symptoms that range from nine months to 20 years, the average is probably four years after exposure to the bacteria. The disease usually affects the skin, peripheral nerves, and upper airway. Lesions on the skin are typical, and may include discolored areas that lose the sensation of touch and temperature. The eyes and nose may also be involved resulting in loss of eyesight and difficulty breathing. If untreated, severe nerve damage may occur, resulting in loss of muscle control and crippling of the hands and feet.

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.

