

Leprosy Q&A

1. What is leprosy?

Leprosy (also known as Hansen's disease) is a complex, chronic neglected tropical disease caused by the *Mycobacterium leprae* bacterium. It affects the skin, the upper respiratory tract and peripheral nerves in the hands and feet, and the eyes. Leprosy can affect anyone, at any age, but it is linked to poverty, malnutrition, and genetic susceptibility.

Leprosy remains a health problem in low and middle-income countries worldwide.

2. How is leprosy transmitted?

It is thought that leprosy is transmitted via droplets from the respiratory tract combined with prolonged, close contact with infected individuals.

3. How is leprosy diagnosed?

Leprosy is difficult to diagnose at its early stages, but it often presents as numb patches on the skin. Currently, the most reliable method to diagnose leprosy, is a slit-skin-smear test in the laboratory.

The disease may incubate for twenty years before presenting with any signs. If leprosy remains undiagnosed, the person affected may unwillingly transmit the disease throughout a community and to family and friends.

However, within a short period of receiving Multidrug therapy, a person affected by leprosy will no longer be infectious. If leprosy is diagnosed in its early stages, it can be treated readily, and it will not cause disabilities. Preventing disabilities from developing means people with leprosy are less likely to suffer from the stigma and discrimination that can destroy their livelihoods and entire lives.

4. How infectious is leprosy?

95% of most populations have a natural immunity to leprosy. The remaining 5% become vulnerable, mainly through poor nutrition, poor living conditions, lack of hygiene and a weakened immune system. Leprosy is not hereditary.

5. Why are people with leprosy often so disfigured?

People with leprosy lose all feeling in the affected areas and as a result, there is diminished awareness of harm from trauma or heat. Without treatment, the lack of sensation can lead to permanent damage to skin, nerves, limbs, and eyes. It can also lead to the development of reoccurring, lifelong, hard-to-treat ulcers.

6. Is there a cure? How is leprosy treated?

Leprosy can be cured using Multidrug Therapy (MDT), available at no cost to patients from the World Health Organization. If MDT is taken in the early stages of the disease, permanent damage to nerves and leprosy-related disability are completely avoided.

7. How many are affected by leprosy in the world today?

In more recent years, the WHO statistics reveal that around 200,000 people are newly diagnosed with leprosy every year. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on health services and leprosy programmes have been affected with a wide disruption to services in many countries. Of great concern is that people with leprosy may receive a late diagnosis and develop lifechanging, visible disabilities as a result. The next WHO Weekly Epidemiological Report which will be issued in September 2022, may reveal the hidden truth.

These statistics do not account for those people who are not diagnosed and are unwillingly transmitting it to their communities. In addition, the statistics do not include those individuals who have been treated for leprosy, but whose disabilities, caused by leprosy need ongoing healthcare needs, or those who are subject to leprosy stigma and discrimination.

It is thought that around four million people worldwide are affected by leprosy.

8. Which countries have leprosy, where is leprosy endemic?

127 countries worldwide reported leprosy to the WHO during 2021. *The WHO has identified 23 Global Priority countries for leprosy, where over 95% of the global total of people detected with leprosy are found. The 23 countries are: Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Comoros, Cote Ivoire, DR Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kiribati, Madagascar, Micronesia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Somalia, and Tanzania.

Brazil, Indonesia and India between them account for nearly 80% of people with leprosy.

*WHO Weekly Epidemiological Record, Global Leprosy Update 10 September 2021, 36, 2021, 96, 421-444 <http://www.who.int/wer>