Indiana State Department of Health | Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About… Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)

What is Hansen's Disease?

Hansen's Disease (HD), commonly known as leprosy, is a long-term disease caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae.* This condition involves the body's immune response to the bacteria and affects the skin, eyes, throat, mouth, and the nerves, affecting muscle tone. Skin nodules or plaques will develop. If left untreated, permanent disfiguration and disability can occur. Cases of HD are well-documented in history, and cases still continue to exist today.

How is Hansen's Disease spread?

The bacteria which cause HD are thought to be spread through repeated contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person over a prolonged period of time. Approximately 95% of the world's population is naturally immune and would not get sick if exposed to the bacteria. Experts are unsure as to why some people are more immune to the bacteria than others.

Who is at risk for Hansen's Disease?

Persons at greatest risk for HD are family members or household contacts of a case who is not receiving treatment.

Most cases in the United States occur in immigrants and refugees who acquired the disease in their native country. Hansen's Disease is more common in temperate, tropical, and subtropical climates, with the largest number of cases occurring in Southeast Asia and Central Africa. In the United States, most cases are detected in residents of Texas, Louisiana, Florida, New York, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico.

What are the symptoms of Hansen's Disease?

Symptoms of HD include a rash, which appears as light reddish or pale colored patches on the trunk or hands and feet. These skin patches get larger and do not go away despite medical treatment and may appear as nodules. Another early symptom of the disease is a loss of feeling or weakness in the fingers and toes. Nasal congestion is also a common sign of the condition. Symptoms of HD typically do not appear until many years after exposure to an infected person.

How do I know if I have Hansen's Disease?

Your health care provider can diagnose HD by a biopsy of the skin showing a rash. A small sample of skin will be collected and sent to laboratory to see if the bacterium that causes HD can be detected.

How can Hansen's Disease be treated?

The best way to prevent the spread of HD is early diagnosis and treatment of people who are infected. Hansen's Disease is treated with multiple antibiotics taken for a period of six months to two years. Usually, the infected person will become non-infectious within a few days or weeks of beginning treatment. Early treatment can prevent the nerve damage and disfiguration often associated with HD.

How is Hansen's Disease prevented?

Preventive antibiotic therapy of close contacts is not recommended; however, current household contacts should be examined immediately by a health care provider and then annually for five years following last contact with the infectious patient.

Is there a vaccine that can prevent Hansen's disease?

There is no vaccine available to prevent HD.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site on Hansen's Disease at: http://www.cdc.gov/nczved/dfbmd/disease_listing/leprosy_ti.html

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