

1) What is Leprosy or Hansen's disease?

Leprosy or Hansen's disease as it is currently known, is a disease caused by a type of slow growing bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae*. Infections are uncommon with 150 to 200 cases of Hansen's disease reported in the U.S. annually. The bacterium primarily infects the skin and the nerves in the skin, but can sometimes cause infections in other parts of the body including the lining of the airway passages in the nose. The disease is not spread easily and most people (approximately 95%) have natural protective immunity against Hansen's disease and won't get infected even if exposed. The disease responds well to treatment, especially if treated early. If the disease progresses and no treatment is sought, permanent damage to the nerves can occur. Because the bacteria that causes Hansen's disease is very slow growing, it can take two to 10 years for signs and symptoms to develop following exposure, and it usually takes weeks to months for the disease to progress once the first signs of infection appear.

2) Is Hansen's disease contagious?

Yes, the infection can be acquired from untreated infected people. However, it is not spread through casual contact such as shaking hands or sitting next to someone during a trip or at a meal. In addition, most people (approximately 95%) are naturally immune (resistant) to infection. Although the exact way Hansen's disease is spread is not established because it is so uncommon, it is suspected some individuals develop high levels of the *M. leprae* bacteria in their noses and spread the bacteria to others who are not immune and who are in prolonged contact with the infected individual. Infected people who are treated, quickly become non-infectious to others. Hansen's disease has not been shown to be spread through sexual transmission or from mother to fetus. Because the disease is not easily spread, there is no need for a newly diagnosed patient just beginning treatment to stay home from work.

3) Who is most at risk of being infected with Hansen's disease?

Family members who share a household with a person with Hansen's disease who is untreated are at greatest risk of being infected. Because protective immunity against the disease is largely genetic or inherited, household members such as spouses who are not genetically related to a person with Hansen's disease are less likely to be infected. Household members at greater risk for infection include parents, children and brothers and sisters of an untreated infected person. Once a person with Hansen's disease starts treatment, they rapidly become non-infectious.

4) What should household contacts of a person diagnosed with Hansen's disease do to make sure they aren't infected?

There is no blood test to determine if a person recently exposed to Hansen's disease is infected. Potentially exposed household contacts are recommended to have a thorough annual physical for five years to check for signs of skin rash. If a skin rash develops, they should consult their health care provider to see if a skin biopsy is recommended.

5) What are the signs and symptoms of Hansen's disease?

Early signs and symptoms of Hansen's disease can include pale or slightly red areas or rash on the body, often with a loss of sensation from the affected area. Loss of feeling in the hands or feet can also occur. The skin in the affected area can become dry and stiff and sometimes painful. Thinning of the eyebrows and eyelashes can occur if the face is involved. Nasal congestion is also sometimes reported. If the disease goes untreated, weakness in the muscles of the hands and feet can occur.

6) How is Hansen's disease diagnosed?

Your doctor will need to collect a small skin biopsy from the rash to make a diagnosis of Hansen's disease. Currently there is no approved blood test available in the U.S.

7) What is the treatment for Hansen's disease?

A person diagnosed with Hansen's disease by their doctor is prescribed antibiotics for treatment, usually for one to two years due to the slow growth of the bacteria. Once treatment is started, within a few days the patient is no longer infectious to others. Your doctor can arrange to get free antibiotics for Hansen's disease from the National Hansen's Disease Program.

8) Can I get leprosy from armadillos?

Leprosy or Hansen's disease has been identified in armadillos in the southern U.S. including Florida. Armadillos also develop a high number of *M. leprae* bacteria when infected. Recent advances in testing have shown that there are some strains of leprosy found in both people and armadillos residing in the southern U.S. The role of armadillos as reservoirs (main source of the *M. leprae* bacterium in the region) or sentinels (easily infected after being exposed to another source) is unclear. However, it should be assumed that an infected armadillo could be a source of infection to a susceptible person in contact with its bodily fluids or organs. Leprosy or Hansen's disease has not been identified in any other wildlife to date. The best way to prevent spread of a variety of diseases from wildlife to people is to avoid direct contact with them. Persons in direct contact with wildlife including armadillos due to their occupation or hobbies should wear gloves and wash hands after wildlife contact. Those harvesting wild game for food should wear gloves while handling uncooked game and cook meat well.

9) Can my pet be infected with Hansen's disease due to contact with armadillos?

No, dogs, cats and most animal species other than armadillos are not susceptible to infection with Hansen's disease. If a pet brings home a dead armadillo, use gloves or a shovel to handle the carcass during disposal.

10) Does Hansen's disease persist in the environment?

Outside an animal or person's body, *M. leprae* does not appear able to survive for long in the environment. However, free-living amoeba in soil have recently been found to protect *M. leprae* bacteria placed in soil. Those concerned about possible soil exposure should wear gloves or other clothing that can act as a barrier between skin and soil.