

# Hansen's Disease

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is Hansen's disease?**

Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy, is an infection caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae*. The infection primarily involves the skin and peripheral nerves, but can affect other body tissues such as the eye, the lining of the upper respiratory tract, muscles, bone and testes.

### **How is Hansen's disease spread?**

The most common accepted theory is that it is spread from person to person by way of the respiratory tract of infected people who are not being treated. Household contacts of an untreated person are at risk of becoming infected.

### **Who gets Hansen's disease?**

Most cases reported in the United States are among foreign-born immigrants and refugee populations. They are diagnosed with the infection in the United States, but were exposed to the disease in their native countries.

### **Where is Hansen's disease found?**

Most cases are found among people living in Southeast Asia and Central Africa. A smaller number of cases occur in people living in South and Central America.

### **How many cases occur in the United States?**

In the United States there are less than 300 newly diagnosed cases reported per year.

### **What are the symptoms of Hansen's disease?**

Symptoms of Hansen's disease do not show up right away. It can take 9 months to 20 years after exposure for symptoms to begin. Symptoms usually appear as skin problems and may include:

- Red skin lesions or rash on the trunk, arms or legs
- Decreased sensation to touch or temperature at the site of lesion or rash

### **How is Hansen's disease diagnosed?**

If a health care provider suspects Hansen's disease, a sample of skin from the affected area must be examined. There is no blood test or other skin test to diagnose the infection.

### **What is the treatment for Hansen's disease?**

While treatment differs depending upon the form of the disease, most people can be appropriately treated. Treatment requires people to take a combination of antibiotics over a period of 1 to 2 years. Getting treatment early in the disease prevents it from spreading to others. Leaving the infection untreated can cause severe nerve damage, loss of muscle control and crippling of the hands and feet.

## **Where can I get more information on Hansen's disease?**

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health [www.nj.gov/health](http://www.nj.gov/health)
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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