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What is Hansen's disease?

Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy, is a chronic disease caused by a bacterium called *Mycobacterium leprae*. It mainly affects the nerves, skin, eyes, and lining of the nose. In spite of its reputation, Hansen's disease is not easily spread to others and can be cured with antibiotics.

Who gets Hansen's disease?

Most people are naturally immune to Hansen's disease. Those at greatest risk for the disease are people who have close contact for months with a person who has the disease but is not being treated. Hansen's disease is rare in the United States and in most countries in the world.

How is Hansen's disease spread?

Although the mode of transmission has not been proven, the major source of the bacteria is probably nasal secretions from patients with untreated disease, probably spread through respiratory droplets. Transmission is not achieved through casual contact, like sitting next to someone with Hansen's disease or sharing a meal. Some armadillos are naturally infected with the bacteria that cause Hansen's disease, but the risk to most people who come in contact with armadillos is very low.

What are the symptoms of Hansen's disease?

The symptoms of Hansen's disease can be very different depending on the type of Hansen's disease and what part of the body is affected. The first signs of Hansen's disease are usually pale or slightly red areas or a rash on the skin. Other symptoms can include loss of feeling in the hands and feet, muscle weakness, nodules on the body and a blocked/stuffy nose. If left untreated, Hansen's disease can lead to more severe symptoms, such as paralysis, blindness, and chronic ulcers.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The bacteria grow very slowly. It can take from a few weeks up to 30 years (average of 3-10 years) for symptoms to develop after a person has been exposed to the bacteria.

How long can an infected person spread Hansen's disease?

In most cases, a person will not be able to infect others after receiving a few days of treatment.

How is Hansen's disease diagnosed?

Hansen's disease is diagnosed by examining a biopsy of the skin or nerve.

What is the treatment for Hansen's disease?

Specific antibiotics can be prescribed by a doctor. Treatment involves taking multiple drugs for a long time (i.e., 1-2 years). It is very important for a patient to fully complete the treatment.

How can Hansen's disease be prevented?

The best way to prevent the spread of Hansen's disease is early diagnosis and treatment of people who are infected. Household and other close contacts should be seen by a doctor as soon as possible and then every year for five years after contact with a person who has the disease.

How can I get more information about Hansen's disease?

- If you have concerns about Hansen's disease, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the [VDH Local Health Districts page](#).
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [the CDC page on leprosy](#).

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