

New York State Department of Health

Leprosy (Hansen's disease)

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is leprosy?

Leprosy is a chronic bacterial disease of the skin and nerves in the hands and feet and, in some cases, the lining of the nose. Leprosy is a rare disease in the United States.

Who gets leprosy?

Anyone can get leprosy, but children seem to be more susceptible than adults.

How is leprosy spread?

It is not clear how the leprosy germ is spread, but household and prolonged close contact is important. The germs probably enter the body through the nose and possibly through broken skin. The germs get in the air through nasal discharge of untreated lepromatous patients.

What are the symptoms of leprosy?

Tuberculoid leprosy symptoms are a few well-defined skin lesions that are numb. Lepromatous leprosy symptoms are a chronically stuffy nose and many skin lesions and nodules on both sides of the body.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

It usually takes about four years for tuberculoid leprosy symptoms to appear and about eight years for lepromatous leprosy symptoms to appear.

When and for how long is a person able to spread leprosy?

In most cases, a person will not infect others after about three months of starting treatment.

What is the treatment for leprosy?

Patients with leprosy should be treated by a doctor who has experience with the disease. Treatment is with multiple drugs for six months to two years.

How can leprosy be prevented?

The best way to prevent the spread of leprosy is the early diagnosis and treatment of people who are infected. For household contacts, immediate and annual examinations are recommended for at least five years after last contact with a person who is infectious.

Revised: June 2004