

Questions and Answers about Leprosy

Q. What is leprosy?

A. Leprosy is an infectious disease caused by a germ called *Mycobacterium leprae*. It was first described as this in 1873 by Dr. Hansen.

Q. How many people suffer from leprosy today?

A. This is a matter of some debate, and a figure of 4 million is perhaps the best estimate. Over 400,000 people are diagnosed with leprosy every year.

Q. What are the early signs of leprosy?

A. The first sign of leprosy is a pale patch on the skin. This patch will have no feeling, as the germ destroys nerve endings.

Q. How is leprosy caught?

A. It is widely accepted that leprosy is caught like the common cold, through air-borne germs. This however has not been scientifically proven. Leprosy is not hereditary.

Q. Can leprosy be cured?

A. Yes, most people have a natural immunity that fights the bacteria without human intervention. For those without this immunity, a combination of antibiotics known as Multi Drug Therapy will cure the disease. These drugs normally take 6 months to cure leprosy, but in severe cases can take up to 2 years.

Q. What damage can leprosy do to the human body?

A. There are 3 areas that leprosy can damage – hands, feet and face. With hands fingers start to curl in, with what is known as claw hand. With feet the ability to lift your feet between steps is lost, causing leprosy sufferers to drag their feet along the ground. This is known as foot drop. The face can experience swelling, and the blink mechanism deteriorates causing eyes to become infected and this can potentially lead to blindness.

Q. What treatment is available for this damage?

A. If damage to hands, feet and face are caught early enough there is a lot modern medicine can do. Tendons can be re-routed (taken from one part of the body and placed in another) to restore the blink mechanism, return finger movement and counter foot drop. The more advanced the leprosy the less successful these procedures are.