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### **What is Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)?**

Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy, is a chronic disease caused by slow-growing bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae* and *Mycobacterium lepromatosis*. 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 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?**

People with Hansen's disease who are coughing or sneezing may spread it to those around them. Spread does not happen through casual contact. Casual contact includes sitting next to someone with Hansen's disease or sharing a meal. Some armadillos do carry the bacteria that causes 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 infection?**

The symptoms of Hansen's disease can vary. The first signs of Hansen's disease are usually pale or slightly red areas or a rash on the skin. Other symptoms can include numbness in the hands and feet, weakness and a blocked/stuffy nose. If left untreated, Hansen's disease can lead to paralysis, blindness, and ulcers.

### **How soon after exposure do symptoms of Hansen's Disease appear?**

The bacteria that causes Hansen's disease grows very slowly. After contact with the bacteria, it may take up to 20 years for someone to develop signs of the disease.

### **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.

## Do people who have been in contact with someone with Hansen's Disease need to be tested and treated?

Some contacts of people with Hansen's disease may receive treatment. Specific treatment can be prescribed by a doctor.

## 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. You can find your local health department at [vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/](https://vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/).
- Visit the CDC page on Hansen's Disease at [cdc.gov/leprosy/](https://cdc.gov/leprosy/) for more information.

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External link will open in new window. Click link to exit Virginia Department of Health Website.