

What is Leprosy?

The first known written reference to leprosy is from about 600 B.C.

1 Introduction

Leprosy is a chronic infectious disease caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae* with two major types: tuberculoid and lepromatous. Patients with tuberculoid leprosy have a relatively limited version of the disease while those with lepromatous leprosy have a more widespread version with advanced symptoms. Leprosy was once feared as a mysterious disease associated with some type of curse and those with the disease were isolated and ostracized. Today, it is known that leprosy is hard to spread and easily treatable once identified.

2 Causes

Leprosy is thought to be spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes, and a healthy person breathes in droplets containing the bacteria. This disease is not highly contagious, though close, prolonged contact with someone with untreated leprosy is needed to catch the disease. The bacterium that causes leprosy multiplies very slowly, with an average incubation period of 5 years.

3 Symptoms

Leprosy symptoms mainly affect the skin, mucous membranes and peripheral nerves. Some of the main symptoms include:

- Muscle weakness
- Numbness in the hands, arms, feet and legs
- Flat, pale or reddish skin lesions

The skin lesions caused by this disease can result in a decreased sensation to touch, temperature or pain. If the disease continues untreated, symptoms may advance to paralysis and deformity of the face, hands and feet due to nerve damage.

5 Treatments

Leprosy is treated with a combination of antibiotics. Treatment will typically last between one and two years, and the disease can be fully cured if the treatment is completed as prescribed. It is important to be diagnosed early because treatment can cure the disease and keep it from getting worse. However, treatment does not reverse nerve damage or physical disfiguration that can occur before a diagnosis.

Did you know?

Only about 5% of all people are susceptible to leprosy.

For more information on leprosy and supportive resources, please visit [rarediseases.org](https://www.rarediseases.org)

References:

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/leprosy>

<https://www.healthline.com/health/leprosy>

<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/leprosy-basic-research>

<https://www.cdc.gov/leprosy/treatment/index.html>