

What is Leprosy?

First signs

Leprosy starts by damaging the smaller nerves that control feeling on the skin's surface.

The first signs of leprosy are numb patches on the skin which look a slightly different colour from the person's normal skin tone. If treated during these early stages there will be no further damage.



Gejandra, from India, has leprosy patches on his body but because he received treatment early his leprosy will not lead to disability. Photo: Georgina Cranston

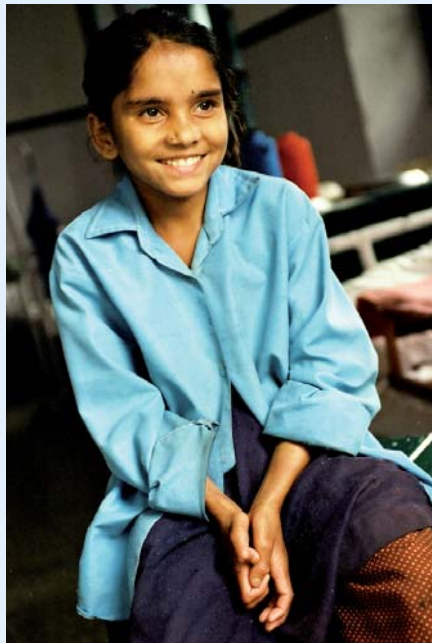
Untreated leprosy

If leprosy is not treated it will attack the larger nerves that supply feeling to the hands, feet, eyes and parts of the face. This means that when people affected by leprosy hurt themselves, for example through treading on something sharp or holding something hot, they do not feel pain and so it is easy for them to ignore their injuries. This can lead to serious ulcers and infection. Over time, repeated injury and infection cause the bones to shorten so the fingers, toes and hands and feet may get smaller.

Hands and feet

If the larger nerves stop working they will also stop sending signals to the muscles and tendons, so there is no movement. This can lead to 'clawing' of the fingers, where the fingers bend into the palm, and 'drop foot', where the foot drags along the ground.

Leprosy can also affect sweat glands, which keep the skin soft. If these stop working, the skin on the hands and feet will get very dry and cracked and wounds will develop more easily.



Sita, from Nepal, has a clawed hand in this picture. She has now had successful surgery so she can easily do everyday things many of us take for granted, like hold a pencil, tie shoelaces and fasten buttons. Photo: Georgina Cranston



Chandrabi is in her 60s and lives with her family in Poladpur, India. She had leprosy for 35 years before an effective treatment became available. Photo: Georgina Cranston

Face

Leprosy can damage the eye nerves so that the eyelid muscles stop working, which would normally make the eyes blink regularly to keep them moist and clean. If this happens the person will not be able to close their eyes, even if they try. Without this natural cleaning and protection a person can eventually become blind.

Leprosy can damage the bones of the nose. In time this causes the nose to collapse and flatten.

Treatment

Medication

In the past various drugs have been used to treat leprosy with differing levels of success, but thankfully in 1982 scientists discovered a very effective cure: multidrug therapy (commonly known as MDT). This is a combination of three drugs, dapsone, rifampicin and clofazimine, taken for six or 12 months, depending on the strength of the person's immune system. People with leprosy can take their medication at home and many can continue their normal jobs and activities. It is not necessary to isolate a person with leprosy at any time.

Surgery

A 'clawed' hand or 'drop foot' can be restored with surgery and physiotherapy. Surgery can also restore eyelid movement, so a person can blink. However, surgery cannot bring feeling back to numb areas of the body.



In Nepal, this young lady is recovering from surgery to correct her 'drop foot' and with the help of physiotherapy she will soon walk normally again. Photo: Georgina Cranston

Taking care

People with feet damaged by leprosy are encouraged to examine them regularly for signs of injury. They should also use footwear that will protect their feet, especially in countries where it is normal to go barefoot. Soaking feet in water and then rubbing the skin with oil keeps them supple and also helps prevent serious injury from cracked skin.



Self-care foot inspection in Ethiopia. Self-care groups are set up in communities so the group members can support each other to prevent injuries and take care of their wounds

Leprosy reaction

When patients begin their medication, the leprosy bacteria are killed quickly, but it can take years for the body to completely get rid of them. During this time the body may react against these dead bacteria, a bit like an allergic reaction; this can make the person feel very ill. Leprosy reaction can also happen before someone starts taking medication, as their natural immune system may already kill off some leprosy bacteria leaving behind dead bacterial cells.

During a reaction there is an increased risk of damage to nerves in the eyes, hands and feet, and in some cases the eyes become much more sensitive to sunlight. There are also periods of inflammation, when lumps appear on the face and body. Treating the reaction quickly with anti-inflammatories can help to prevent permanent nerve damage and disability.



After having leprosy reaction, Bubake, from Kaziba, DR Congo, wears sunglasses to protect his sensitive eyes. Photo: Georgina Cranston



A young patient, from Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, recovering from leprosy reaction

Leprosy facts



For people living in areas affected by poverty it is particularly important to be aware of the symptoms of leprosy



Leprosy is not hereditary and cannot be passed by touch

- **Leprosy is a mildly infectious disease** caused by a bacterium called *Mycobacterium leprae* (a relative of the tuberculosis bacterium or 'TB' germ).
- **Leprosy damages the nerves in the cooler parts of the body** – especially in the skin and surface areas of the fingers and toes, legs, arms and face. It can stay in the body for up to 20 years without showing symptoms.
- **Leprosy is most common in places of poverty.** Dirty surroundings, overcrowding and poor nutrition and housing all make people more susceptible to leprosy infection.
- **Leprosy is not hereditary and it cannot be caught by touch.** Scientists believe it is passed through droplets of moisture, carried on the air, from someone who has leprosy but has not yet started treatment.
- **Many people are terrified of catching leprosy** and some even see it as a curse. This means that, for some, a diagnosis of leprosy can lead to divorce, loss of work, home and friends. Not only are they stigmatised but so are their relatives. Therefore people will often hide their symptoms for a long time rather than seeking help and medication, which eventually causes much more physical damage and leads to disability.
- **Although there is no specific vaccine, leprosy is curable with multidrug therapy (MDT).** Within one day of starting MDT there is no risk of the disease spreading to anyone else. However, lack of education means many people affected by leprosy are still stigmatised, even after they have been cured, especially if the disease has caused disfigurement or disability.



The Leprosy Mission pays for people like Claris (above), from Bas Congo West, to train in professions such as tailoring



The Leprosy Mission has a low-cost housing scheme, which provides better homes for people affected by leprosy

The work of The Leprosy Mission

The Leprosy Mission is an international Christian development organisation working with people affected by leprosy in around 30 countries. The charity aims to demonstrate the love of Christ by working to eradicate the causes and consequences of this disease.

We work with governments and support government medical staff, through training, to examine people for leprosy and provide medication, surgery and treatment. After patients finish their medicine, The Leprosy Mission continues to care for their social and economic needs. We empower them to regain their independence, dignity and place in the community through education, job training, business loans, social support groups and housing schemes. We also teach people to manage their disabilities through self-care.

You can donate to our work over the phone on **01733 370505** or online at www.leprosymission.org.uk

You could also buy a Gift for Life. There is a wide range of gifts in our catalogue, from the gift of eye surgery, to save a person's sight, to a new house, so someone can have a better standard of living. See the website for more details.

More information

For more detailed information and statistics on leprosy, please see:

- www.leprosymission.org.uk
- World Health Organisation (WHO) www.who.int/topics/leprosy/en
- International Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations (ILEP) www.ilep.org.uk

What is leprosy?



A simple explanation about the **causes**, **symptoms** and **treatment** of leprosy



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