



Pan American
Health
Organization



World Health
Organization
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE Americas

NEGLECTED INFECTIOUS DISEASES



LEPROSY

What is leprosy?

- Leprosy is caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae*, also known as Hansen's bacillus.
- The bacteria *M. leprae* multiplies very slowly and the disease has an average incubation period of five years. In some cases symptoms appear nine months after infection and in other cases can take up to 20 years.
- Initial symptoms are spots on the skin, which later turn into skin lesions that are lighter than normal skin color and have a loss of sensitivity. Other symptoms are muscle weakness and numbness.
- The disease mainly affects the skin, nerves, mucous membranes of the upper respiratory tract, and eyes.
- Leprosy is curable with multidrug therapy (dapsone, rifampicin, and clofazimine), a combination that kills the pathogen, cures the patient, and halts transmission.
- If untreated, the disease can cause progressive lesions, leading to disability and blindness.
- Although leprosy is not highly contagious, it is transmitted through direct contact with bodily fluids of the nose and mouth, although this only occurs when there is frequent contact with patients who have not been treated.
- Leprosy control has improved a great deal thanks to case detection and awareness-raising campaigns in several countries where the disease is endemic.
- Early diagnosis and multidrug therapy are key to eliminating the disease.

Key facts

- In 2015, 211,973 new cases were recorded worldwide, with 33,789 new cases in the Region of the Americas.
- Leprosy was reported in 24 countries of the Americas, with more than 100 cases reported each year in the following countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Venezuela. However, 94% of all cases in the Region were concentrated in Brazil.

PAHO/WHO's response

- In 1992, PAHO/WHO began promoting the *Regional Plan of Action for the Elimination of Leprosy in the Americas* for coverage with multidrug therapy. Since then, a 42% treatment coverage rate has been achieved and, since 2001, coverage has been almost universal. The Organization provides medication free of charge to all people who need it, through donations from the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development.
- In 2009, the PAHO/WHO Member Countries, through [Resolution CD49.R19](#) of 2009, committed to the goal of eliminating leprosy as public health problem at the first subnational level by 2015; and in 2012, PAHO/WHO formulated a "[Action Plan to Further Advance Towards Leprosy Elimination in Latin America and the Caribbean](#)" to reduce the prevalence of this disease to less than one case per 10,000 people.
- [Resolution A/RES/65/215](#) on the "Elimination of Discrimination Against Persons Affected by Leprosy and their Family Members," approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010, seeks to promote the formulation and implementation of policies and measures to prevent discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members.
- In 2016, the PAHO/WHO Directing Council adopted Resolution [CD55.R9](#), which includes implementation of the plan for the elimination of neglected infectious diseases, including leprosy.
- WHO prepared the [Global Leprosy Strategy 2016-2020](#), which provides guidelines to directors of national leprosy programs, so that they can take steps to reduce the burden of the disease in collaboration with various sectors, including organizations that work for human rights and gender equality.