



Media release – BACKGROUND INFORMATION

World Leprosy Day 2018

About ILEP the International Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations

ILEP is a membership organisation of 14 international NGOs whose outreach spans 67 countries and 700 projects worldwide. ILEP is supported by two advisory boards; a Panel of Women and Men Affected by Leprosy (the Panel) and the ILEP Technical Commission (ITC). In the fight against leprosy, ILEP and its Members work alongside persons affected by leprosy, the World Health Organization, the Novartis Foundation, the Nippon Foundation, other NGOs, Governments, Ministries of Health and over 500,000 supporters worldwide.
www.ilepfederation.org

About World Health Organization Weekly Epidemiological Record

The World Health Organization's Weekly Epidemiological Record provides rapid and accurate dissemination of epidemiological information on cases and outbreaks of diseases under the International Health Regulations and on other communicable diseases of public health importance, including emerging or re-emerging infections. An electronic bilingual English/French version of the WER is accessible every Friday and can be downloaded free of charge.
<http://www.who.int/wer/en/>



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Background info for media

About public health strategy in leprosy

Leprosy control programmes have shown impressive achievements during the past three decades. With the introduction of multidrug therapy (MDT) the *registered prevalence* of leprosy, globally, decreased from more than five million people in the mid-1980s to around 200,000 in 2016. More than 16 million people have been treated since then.

Elimination of leprosy as a public health problem was defined as less than one person diagnosed per 10,000 head of population. This figure was achieved at a global level in the year 2000 and by 2005 most countries had achieved this target. However, these statistics hide the reality that there are still some countries which are highly endemic for leprosy or have highly endemic pockets. The continued decline in global prevalence rate has not led to the disappearance of the disease in many localized sites. As a result, many people still have leprosy and it is being actively passed on to others in their communities.

Cases on leprosy were diagnosed in 136 countries worldwide in 2016. When some of those cases are children, it is clear that the transmission is recent and ongoing. In 2016, 18,230 children were diagnosed with leprosy. Alarming, a proportion of the children diagnosed were found to have already visible impairments which indicate advanced stage disease and late detection of leprosy.

The number of people newly diagnosed with leprosy and the number of people newly diagnosed with visible and substantial impairments highlights the urgent need for special action to detect all people affected with leprosy in highly endemic countries or highly endemic pockets. This means scaling up and improving leprosy services, notably case detection and ensuring treatment completion.

About countries where leprosy is highly endemic or with highly endemic pockets

Leprosy was diagnosed in 136 countries worldwide in 2016. There are 22 priority countries worldwide where 95% of all new leprosy patients are reported: Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Federated States of Micronesia, India, Indonesia, Kiribati, Madagascar, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan and United Republic of Tanzania.



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Brazil, India and Indonesia account for approx. 80% of new leprosy patients globally. India alone accounts for over 60%.

Sources include: [World Health Organization website](#), [World Health Organization Weekly epidemiological record 2 September 2016](#).

About leprosy (also known as Hansen’s disease)

Leprosy is caused by a slow growing bacillus, *Mycobacterium leprae*. It is likely to be transmitted by droplets from the nose and mouth during close and frequent contact with untreated patients, but it is generally not highly infectious. The incubation period of the disease is between two and eight years but it can take 20 years or even longer for symptoms to appear. 95% of people have natural immunity to leprosy.

Leprosy is a curable disease and can be easily treated with a course of multidrug therapy (MDT). The treatment is a combination of carefully selected drugs, including rifampicin and dapson. Drugs are donated by the Novartis Pharma company and are available free of charge to all patients worldwide. MDT is highly effective, has few side-effects, and a low relapse rate. Since the introduction of MDT in the 1980s, over 16 million leprosy patients have been cured.

Although MDT is available free of charge to patients, millions of people around the world are still affected. If left untreated, leprosy causes immense physical suffering and disability, such as nerve damage and disfigurement of the face and limbs, and blindness. Its characteristic lack of sensation can lead to injury and loss of digits or even limbs.

Leprosy is closely linked to poverty especially in the developing countries of Asia, the Americas, Africa and the Pacific, where 14 countries reported more than a thousand new diagnoses of leprosy in 2016. The 1 September 2017 World Health Organization Weekly epidemiological record provides figures from 143 countries in five regions that provide leprosy statistics. At the end of 2016, there were 214,783 people newly diagnosed with leprosy (a slight rise from 210,758 reported at the end of 2015).

Sources include: [World Health Organisation Weekly epidemiological record 1ST SEPTEMBER 2017, 92th YEAR, No 35, 2017, 92, 501–520](#)

