



Leprosy and children: Q&A for World Leprosy Day 2018

What causes leprosy?

Leprosy is a disease caused by a bacillus, *Mycobacterium leprae*. It multiplies very slowly and the incubation period can be a number of years (on average about 5 years).

What are the symptoms?

For many people the first signs of leprosy are pale patches of skin or numbness in the fingers or toes. This is because the disease mainly affects the nerves and skin. If left untreated, it can lead to nerve damage, loss of feeling (sensation) and paralysis of muscles in the hands, feet and face.

How can it cause disabilities?

The bacteria attack nerve endings and destroy the body's ability to feel pain and injury. Without feeling pain, people don't realise when they injure themselves and their injuries are often severe and can become infected. Changes to the skin also leave the person susceptible to ulcers, which if left untreated, can cause further damage, wounds and visible disfigurements to the face and limbs. If the facial nerve is affected, this can interfere with a person's ability to blink, which can eventually cause blindness.

Leprosy and children

How many children have leprosy?

In 2017, the WHO reported a total number of 18,230 new child cases of leprosy. (WHO weekly epidemiological record, published 1 Sept 2017.) Of these, 281 cases were of children who were already showing visible impairments.

Reports in some countries have noted about 11% of children already have visible impairments at the time of diagnosis.

What is the most common age for children to show signs of infection?

The most common age for children to show signs of leprosy is between 10 and 14.

What's the most likely source of transmission for children? Is it living with infected family members in households?

Household contact is the most likely source of leprosy transmission. But this isn't limited to just family, it can include anyone in regular and close contact with an untreated person.

What do the child rates of leprosy tell us?

Transmission to children is an epidemiological indicator that the disease is still actively being transmitted through communities. The fact that children are still contracting leprosy tells us that we need to improve the number and efficiency of public health initiatives to stop the spread of this disease.



Is multidrug therapy safe for children?

Yes, it is safe. There have not been significant reports of adverse effects from MDT treatments in children, however dosages should be adjusted for their weight and smaller size.

Are there likely to be hidden cases?

Yes. Beyond the new cases that are reported annually, there are likely to be millions more adults and children living with undiagnosed leprosy. Further, there are about 6 million people who have been cured of the disease, but experience residual effects such as disability and discrimination. The majority, 81%, of all new cases occur in three countries: India, Brazil and Indonesia – which are the most highly endemic countries for leprosy.

Achieving Zero Leprosy

Wasn't leprosy eliminated?

The World Health Organisation declared leprosy 'eliminated as a public health problem' at a global level in 2000. This was based on a definition of less than one case per 10,000 people across a larger population. This did not mean total eradication of the disease, and there were still many cases in pockets all over the world. However, once the target was reached, resources were often focused on other diseases and efforts to find and treat new cases diminished. The situation today is that there are around 220,000 new cases reported globally each year.

How can it be ended once and for all?

The stigma still associated with leprosy remains a barrier to ending transmission, as people are often reluctant to get diagnosed or seek help. It can also have a devastating impact on peoples' lives, long after they have been cured. That's why ILEP members are working in partnership with many different organisations, governments and policymakers towards zero leprosy. We want to stop the transmission of leprosy, prevent disabilities and promote social inclusion by ending discrimination. To find out more about achieving Zero Transmission, Zero Disabilities and Zero Discrimination, visit www.triplezerocampaign.org.