

What is leprosy?

The infectious disease Leprosy is caused by the bacillus *Mycobacterium leprae*. The bacillus multiplies slowly, resulting in an incubation period of around five years. It can take up to 20 years before the first symptoms appear. Leprosy attacks the skin and nerves of infected individuals. The most common first signs of leprosy are patches of numbness. These are painless and do not itch, and thus frequently go unnoticed or are thought to be harmless. If allowed to progress untreated, the disease eventually causes damage to the nerves.

Affected persons suffer from numbness in the extremities of the body, in particular the hands and feet. One effect of this loss of sensation is that injuries go undetected or not thought to be serious. The consequence of this is open wounds and infections.

As the disease progresses, damage to nerves results in blindness as well as visible disfigurements of the nose and fingers.

Leprosy is transmitted via droplet infection through the nose and mouth following longer periods of close contact with an infected person. In many countries, leprosy sufferers are stigmatised and shunned from normal society, and even their own families, for fear of contagion. In many places, laws specifically aimed at preventing people with leprosy from taking part in everyday life are still in force.



Who suffers from leprosy?

Leprosy is a poverty-related disease that occurs in the world's poorest areas. In 2015, over 200,000 people worldwide became infected with leprosy. Over 80 percent of these live in India, Brazil and Indonesia. A person is diagnosed with leprosy almost every two minutes¹.

On a global level, important goals have been achieved in the fight against leprosy over the last 30 years. Leprosy nevertheless remains a public health concern, above all in the poorer regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Every tenth newly diagnosed leprosy patient is a child. The rates of

¹ <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/249601/1/WER9135.pdf?ua=1>

² <http://www.who.int/lep/leprosy/en/>

infection in boys and girls show that leprosy continues to be transmitted via the same pathways.

How is leprosy cured?

Leprosy can be cured with a combination therapy of different antibiotics ('multidrug therapy'). According to the World Health Organization, more than 16 million people have received this form of treatment since the 1980s. However, the treatment is often lengthy as well as associated with many side effects, and is only effective if it is carried out properly and fully. The nerve damage caused by leprosy cannot be reversed. At best, it is possible to surgically restore deformed limbs.

Why does leprosy still exist?

The number of new leprosy infections in affected countries are regarded as less alarming than the figures from the 1980s. As a consequence, the fight against the disease has declined in significance and is correspondingly neglected. And because the disease frequently goes undetected until it is much too late, many people living in the vicinity of leprosy sufferers continue to become infected.



What is FAIRMED doing to combat leprosy?

FAIRMED – formerly Leprosy Relief Emmaus Switzerland – has been active in the fight against leprosy since 1959. The organisation provides support for health facilities in the early recognition and treatment of leprosy in India and Sri Lanka as well as a number of Central African countries. In the foreground throughout are particularly disadvantaged people in remote areas or slums. Workshops are organised at schools so that also children can identify the early signs of leprosy.

FAIRMED assists in the construction of health centres, and through the training of health personnel, ensures that leprosy sufferers are treated successfully. In remote regions, voluntary health workers assist these efforts by identifying and reporting the first

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signs of leprosy. FAIRMED provides these volunteer staff with motorcycles and bicycles, among other tools and support. The development organisation has constructed hospitals and workshops all around the world to help those that suffer from the sometimes severe disabilities caused by leprosy.

The organisation is also participating in a new prevention program that is aimed at breaking the chain of infection of leprosy. Thereby, close family and dependents as well as people of who have come into contact with leprosy sufferers are provided with preventative treatment by means of a single antibiotic. Around two million people live with disabilities caused by leprosy². With its projects in India, FAIRMED helps to ensure that they receive effective medical assistance and are able to participate in daily social life.



In close cooperation with governments and health ministries, the organisation promotes awareness of leprosy and supports the treatment and reintegration of people with leprosy. Because many countries still hold firmly to outdated laws that discriminate against leprosy sufferers, the fight against the stigma of the disease is of vital importance. FAIRMED coordinates its global activities from Bern, and works exclusively alongside local experts on location.

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