



January 2011

Community and Health Services Department

# Leprosy (Hansen's disease)

## Leprosy

Leprosy is a chronic disease that attacks the skin, the nerves in the hands and feet, and in some cases, the upper airway. Leprosy is caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae*. Anyone can get leprosy, but the disease is rarely seen in children less than three years of age. Biologic parents, siblings and other children who live in the same house with an untreated person are at increased risk. Leprosy is a rare disease in Canada.

### Symptoms of leprosy

There are two forms of leprosy based on the severity of symptoms of the disease: lepromatous and tuberculoid.

In lepromatous leprosy, the skin lesions are many and widespread. Infection in the nose may cause crusting, bleeding and blockage; infection in the eye may cause inflammation of the iris and cornea.

In tuberculoid leprosy, the skin lesions are fewer and have little or no feeling. There may also be numbness in the hands, feet or other parts of the body.

### How leprosy spreads

It is not clear exactly how the leprosy germ is spread, but leprosy is not highly infectious. Close and frequent contact with untreated cases is required for leprosy to spread. The bacteria that cause leprosy spread through airborne droplets from the nose and mouth. Postnatal transmission from mother to baby can occur during breastfeeding. It is unlikely that leprosy germs can spread through contact with contaminated objects.

*Mycobacterium leprae* multiplies very slowly in the human body. Symptoms can take from nine months to 20 years after exposure to the bacteria to develop. It usually takes four years from the time of exposure to the bacteria for symptoms of tuberculoid leprosy to appear, and eight years for symptoms of lepromatous leprosy to appear.

For further information, please call:  
**York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653**  
**TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)**