

## Leprosy and its effects

- Leprosy can lead to irreversible disability if not treated promptly.
- Stress and depression are common among those affected, as the disease often brings significant psychological and social challenges.
- Life for affected individuals often becomes deeply isolating and difficult, with limited or no support.



### What causes delay in accessing care and treatment

- Visible symptoms of leprosy—such as open wounds, ulcers, skin reactions, and deformities—fuel stigma and lead to social exclusion.
- The fear of ostracization often leads people to hide their condition, preventing timely diagnosis and treatment.
- Low awareness about leprosy remains a primary driver of the stigma and discrimination surrounding the disease.

- According to estimates from organizations working on leprosy (Sasakawa India Leprosy Foundation), about 762 leprosy colonies are still there across India. Residents in these colonies often live with families, including third-generation members, all of whom face persistent discrimination, denying them equal opportunities for education, employment, and development.
- Basic facilities like hygiene, clean water, and sanitation are lacking in these colonies, contributing to poor health conditions and limited livelihood opportunities.
- Exclusion from community life often denies affected individuals access to essential community resources, including immunization programmes, public gatherings, and shared water sources.

**“Know leprosy”  
for “No leprosy”**

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## Snapshot of Leprosy in India – key facts



- Leprosy is one of the oldest diseases known to humankind.
- India bears the highest burden of leprosy in the world with more than 50% global cases. In 2024-25, India reported 1,00,957 new cases of leprosy.
- Leprosy still affects around 200,000 people worldwide out of which 40% are women and 5% are children.
- In India, 4.68% of children were affected by leprosy in 2024-25.
- A lack of awareness about disease and prevailing stigma & discrimination, makes it harder for individuals to come forward for diagnosis and treatment.

## What is leprosy

- Leprosy is a chronic infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, one of the oldest known bacterial diseases.
- It spreads through nasal droplets from untreated cases.
- It does not spread by touch, handshakes, or sharing food with affected persons.
- It is neither hereditary nor sexually transmitted.
- Leprosy has a long incubation period (the time between exposure and appearance of the first symptom), usually between two to five years, and sometimes even longer. Due to this long latency, people may be asymptomatic for years, unknowingly transmitting the disease to others.
- The disease primarily affects the skin, peripheral nerves, and eyes. Numb, hypopigmented, reddish, or coppery patches on the skin are key early symptoms with loss of feeling of touch, pain, heat or cold.



- Other symptoms/ signs may be

- Shiny or oily skin of face
- Nodules on skin
- Thickening of ear lobe(s)/nodules on earlobe(s) or face
- Inability to close eye(s)/watering of eye(s), loss of eyebrows loss
- Collapse of nasal bridge (saddle nose deformity)
- Ulceration in hand(s) / painless wounds or burns on palm(s)
- Weakness in hand(s) when grasping or holding objects
- Tingling in finger(s)/ toe(s), hand(s) / foot/feet
- Ulceration or painless wounds or burns in foot /feet
- Clawing / bending of finger(s)/ toe(s); foot drop / dragging the foot while walking
- Loss of sensation in sole of foot/feet

- If untreated, leprosy can lead to severe neurological complications and disabilities.
- Visible deformities are called grade-2 disabilities. They include ulcers, claw hands, muscle weakness, difficulty in blinking, eye issues, loss of fingers and toes, collapse of the nasal bridge etc.
- In 2024-25, India reported 1893 new cases of grade-2 disabilities.
- Disabilities resulting from leprosy amplify stigma and discrimination. Misunderstandings about the disease often lead to social exclusion, creating additional barriers to diagnosis and treatment.
- Poor nutrition, inadequate sanitation, and overcrowding are risk factors. The disease disproportionately affects poor.
- Leprosy remains one of the most stigmatizing diseases. Families of affected individuals, including children, often face discrimination in education, employment, and social settings.

## Leprosy treatment & prevention

- Leprosy is completely treatable with Multi-Drug Therapy (MDT), a combination of dapsone, rifampicin, and clofazimine. This is available free of cost at all government health facilities.
- A single dose of Rifampicin (SDR) can prevent leprosy in close contacts, making it a key intervention in halting transmission.
- Lack of adequate knowledge and information makes early diagnosis challenging for India's 1.4 billion population.
- Thanks to the government's efforts in providing MDT, leprosy cases have decreased since introduction of MDT in 1984-85 from 482,000 to 100,957 in 2024-25.
- Grade-2 (visible) disabilities caused by leprosy have also declined, from 5,794 cases (4.61%) in 2014-15 to 1893 cases (1.8%) in 2024-25.
- Self-Care: persons equipped with the right knowledge can take care of themselves. The ulcers can be healed, and simple exercises can prevent severe disabilities.
- Reconstructive surgery (RCS) is also available for correction of deformities/ disabilities at specialized centers. The government gives incentive to patients undergoing RCS.

