



HANSEN'S DISEASE (LEPROSY)

POTENTIALLY IMPACTED ASCP MEMBERS

On September 6, 2016, local newspapers first reported that two students at a Riverside County elementary school, Indian Hills Elementary School in Jurupa Valley, were diagnosed by a doctor as having Hansen's disease, more commonly known as leprosy. Specimens from the two students were sent to the National Hansen's Disease (Leprosy) Program lab in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Test results are expected in several weeks, according to the Riverside County public health department. On Tuesday, September 7th, more than one hundred absences were reported at Indian Hills Elementary. This hot topic addresses what your District should know about leprosy and how your District should respond to questions about this disease.

WHAT IS LEPROSY?

According to the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control](#) (CDC), leprosy is a long-lasting but easily treated infection caused by bacteria. In many societies, leprosy has long had a stigma. For example, biblical passages¹ conflated lepers with uncleanliness and moral disease, and this stereotype has persisted in the Judeo-Christian world for centuries. Today, however, leprosy is well understood as a rare but easily treatable disease. Its early diagnosis and treatment usually prevent disability related to the disease from developing.

Transmission

When a diseased person coughs or sneezes—spraying droplets into the air—or when nasal fluids (also known as secretions) transfer onto bystanders by other means, these droplets and secretions can contain the bacteria that cause Hansen's disease and infect others.

Exposure Risk

In California and the U.S., leprosy is rare, and the risk of exposure is minuscule. Nevertheless, a person may be at risk for the disease if he or she is in prolonged close contact with a person who has untreated Hansen's disease. If he or she has not been treated, a person could be exposed to the bacteria that cause leprosy. As soon as the patient starts treatment, however, he or she is no

¹ Leviticus 13:44-46.

longer able to spread the disease. Also, evidence indicates that 95% of adults are naturally immune to the disease, even if they're exposed to the bacteria that causes it.

Signs and Symptoms

The bacteria that cause Hansen's disease grows very slowly, and it may take 2-10 years before signs and symptoms appear. Symptoms mainly affect the skin, nerves, and mucous membranes, and these may include faded or discolored skin lesions, growths on the skin, thick, stiff or dry skin, severe pain, numbness on affected areas of the skin, muscle weakness or paralysis (especially in the hands and feet), eye problems that may lead to blindness, enlarged nerves (especially those around the elbow and knee), a stuffy nose, nose bleeds, and ulcers on the soles of feet.

Treatment

Leprosy is easily treatable. It is usually treated for 6 months to 2 years with a combination of antibiotics. People with the disease may be treated at special clinics run by the National Hansen's Disease Program.

WHAT CAN YOUR DISTRICT DO ABOUT LEPROSY OR FEAR OF LEPROSY?

Statistics show that leprosy is rare in the U.S. There are currently about 6,500 cases, and approximately 3,300 require active medical management. Nevertheless, leprosy remains misunderstood. The stigma associated with the disease manifests itself in the psychological and social effects which may be more difficult to deal with than the actual physical illness. When there's a reported case, Districts can mainly do two things:

1. Follow the directives of their local public health officials in the event of a reported leprosy infection
2. Disseminate reliable information about leprosy to your District community---staff, faculty, students, parents, volunteers, and other interested parties.

HOW CAN ASCIP ASSIST YOUR DISTRICT?

If you need additional help, please contact ASCIP's Risk Services staff at (562) 404-8029 to discuss your risk management or loss control needs!