

Leprosy: Myths, Facts, and the Stigma We Must Leave Behind

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A Story We Can All Understand

When 38-year-old Satheesha, a shopkeeper, noticed a pale patch on his arm, he ignored it. It didn't hurt, didn't itch, and life was busy. Months later, he felt numbness in his fingers and began dropping objects. Embarrassed and afraid, he told no one.

He believed the common things people say:

"Leprosy is painful... fingers rot and fall off... it's contagious... it's a curse..."

By the time he finally visited a health centre, he was surprised to learn the truth: leprosy is **completely curable**, treatment is **free**, and most complications happen only because people **delay diagnosis due to fear**.

Satheesha's story reflects how myths and stigma often cause more suffering than the disease itself.

What is Leprosy?

Leprosy (Hansen's disease) is a slow-growing bacterial infection caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*.

It mainly affects the skin, nerves, eyes, and lining of the nose.

The disease develops slowly — sometimes over years — and is fully curable with simple medicines called Multi-Drug Therapy (MDT).

Common Symptoms You Should Know

- Light-colored or reddish skin patches that feel numb
- Tingling or loss of sensation in hands and feet
- Weakness of fingers or toes
- Thickened nerves
- Dryness or reduced sweating in certain areas
- Eye dryness or irritation

If any of these appear, a quick visit to a dermatologist or health centre helps rule out or confirm the disease early.

Myths vs Facts — Clearing the Confusion

Myth 1: “Leprosy is painful and causes fingers or toes to rot and fall off.”

Fact: Leprosy usually causes loss of sensation, not pain.

This numbness is the real danger because people cannot feel injuries, burns, or cuts. These unnoticed wounds can lead to ulcers and infections. Severe deformities or loss of digits (fingers and toes) occur only because of repeated, unnoticed injuries over many years, not because body parts “rot and fall off.”

The “painful” truth is the absence of pain, which delays diagnosis.

Myth 2: “Leprosy spreads easily.”

Fact: It does *not*.

Leprosy spreads only after prolonged, close, repeated contact with an untreated patient.

Once treatment starts, the person becomes non-infectious within a few days.

Myth 3: “Leprosy cannot be cured.”

Fact: It is 100% curable with MDT, available free of cost at all government health centers.

Early treatment prevents disability completely.

Myth 4: “White patches like vitiligo or leukoderma are leprosy.”

Fact: No. They are completely unrelated conditions.

Vitiligo is a pigment disorder where the skin loses colour (melanin).

- Pure white patches
- Normal sensation
- No nerve involvement
- Not infectious or contagious

Leprosy, by contrast, may cause pale patches with reduced sensation due to nerve involvement.

Confusing vitiligo with leprosy leads to unnecessary fear and cruel stigma for people who already struggle with a cosmetic condition.

Myth 5: “Patients with leprosy should be isolated.”

Fact: Treated patients can live normal lives, work, study, and participate in society.

Isolation is not required and only increases stigma and suffering.

Myth 6: “Leprosy is a curse or punishment.”

Fact: This belief is outdated and unscientific.

Leprosy is a simple bacterial infection — nothing more.

The Social Stigma: A Bigger Enemy Than the Disease

Despite being curable, leprosy still carries heavy stigma in many communities.

People fear:

- Rejection by family
- Loss of employment
- Marriage problems
- Public shame

This fear causes many to hide the disease, leading to late diagnosis and preventable disability.

How Can We Reduce Stigma?

1. Spread factual information

Fear reduces when knowledge increases.

2. Encourage early check-ups

Numb patches or unexplained weakness should never be ignored.

3. Support people undergoing treatment

They are non-infectious and deserve dignity and compassion.

4. Correct myths in families and communities

Small conversations save lives.

Treatment: Simple, Safe, Free

Multi-Drug Therapy (MDT) cures the infection.

It usually takes **6 to 12 months** depending on the type.

Regular check-ups help protect nerves and prevent complications.

Leprosy Is Curable. Stigma Should Not Be Its Companion.

Satheesha completed his treatment and returned to his daily life without disability.

What healed him wasn't just medicine — it was accurate information and timely help.

Let's build a society where people feel safe to seek care without fear or shame.

Leprosy is curable.

Stigma is not.

And awareness is the cure for both.

World Leprosy Day 2026

Theme: "Leprosy is curable, the real challenge is stigma"

World Leprosy Day is observed internationally every year on the last Sunday of January to increase the public awareness of leprosy or Hansen's Disease. It was chosen by French humanitarian Raoul Follereau as a tribute to the life of Mahatma Gandhi who had compassion for people afflicted with leprosy and in India, it is observed on January 30th, his death anniversary. This day serves as an opportunity to remind the world, that leprosy still exists, and that millions of vulnerable people are still living with the consequences of this neglected tropical disease.

Burden of the problem:

Leprosy is a neglected tropical disease (NTD) which still occurs in more than 120 countries, with around 200 000 new cases reported every year. Elimination of leprosy as a public health problem (defined as prevalence of less than 1 per 10 000 population as per World Health Assembly resolution 44.9) was achieved globally in the year 2000 and in most countries by the year 2010.

The reduction in the number of new cases has been gradual. As per data of 2023, Brazil, India and Indonesia continue to report more than 10 000 new cases, while 12 other countries (Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Somalia, Sri Lanka and the United Republic of Tanzania) each reported 1000–10 000 new cases. Fifty-six countries reported 0 cases and 112 reported fewer than 1000 new cases.

Ref: Weekly Epidemiological Record, No 37, 13 September 2024, Pg 501–521.

St Joseph Leprosy Hospital:

Father Muller Charitable Institutions has a history of over 145 years of leprosy services. In 1890, when leprosy was clothed in stigma, Fr Augustus Muller, the founder started a home to provide humanitarian services for unfortunate patients and called it St Joseph's Asylum which later came to be known as St Joseph's Leprosy Hospital and Asylum in 1892 which is the first leprosy hospital in South India. During the Bubonic plague in 1902 and Cholera epidemic in 1907 the institution served the afflicted with great care. The activities of the SJLH included treatment of patients, organizing rural clinics, school health programmes, reconstructive surgeries, rehabilitation and other welfare activities for the benefit of the patients. Many dynamic and devoted Directors, Medical Professionals, Administrators and other members of the staff served one after the other to build up one of the earliest and biggest leprosy hospital in the country, giving free treatment to the poor patients. The St Joseph's Leprosy Hospital from 2020 has been merged with Father Muller Medical College Hospital

(FMMCH) in the Department of Dermatology, venereology and Leprosy; which is actively involved in National Leprosy Eradication Programme (NLEP).

About the Department:

The Department of Dermatology, Venereology & Leprosy at Father Muller Medical College Hospital, Kankanady, has been in the forefront of leprosy care for several decades.

It began with the leprosy hospital then branched into dermatology and now into a fully equipped department under FMMCH.

Notable fact is that in 1991 the department began the Post Graduate Programme way before the Under Graduate MBBS programme that began in 1999. Making the then Father Muller Hospital and Research Centre and other 2 medical college hospitals all over Indian to have PG programme commence before UG programme.

3rd May 2025 marked another milestone with the opening of its upgraded Dermatology Outpatient Department and state-of-the-art Aesthetic Dermatology Clinic.

A three-time recipient of the Best Department Award by Indian Association of Dermatology, Venereology & Leprosy (IADVL) Karnataka, the department continues its legacy of excellence by offering comprehensive care ranging from advanced diagnostics and treatment of skin, hair, nail, pigmentary, and autoimmune disorders to a wide array of procedural and aesthetic services. These include biopsies, vitiligo surgeries, cryotherapy, cautery, PRP and GFC therapy, microneedling, chemical peels, and radiofrequency-assisted skin rejuvenation, along with cutting-edge laser technologies such as Q-switched Nd:YAG, IPL, and CO₂ for pigmentation correction, hair removal, and scar treatment. Anti-aging therapies like Botox and dermal fillers complement the facility's offerings, while specialized services in STI and leprosy management continue to strengthen its role as a center of hope and healing. With expert consultants, trained aesthetic dermatologists, and modern infrastructure, the department remains committed to delivering **world-class skin care** that is **accessible** and **affordable** for all.