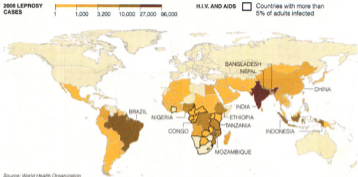


## Dueling AIDS and the Specter of Leprosy

New evidence suggests that antiretroviral drugs used to treat AIDS may cause hidden leprosy infections to emerge in patients. As affordable AIDS drugs arrive in poor countries with high numbers of leprosy infections, experts say there could be thousands of new leprosy cases.



Source: World Health Organization

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# Worrisome Link: AIDS Drugs and Leprosy

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.

With affordable AIDS drugs arriving in many poor countries, experts say a startling and worrisome side effect has emerged: in some patients, the treatment uncovers a hidden leprosy infection.

No one knows how widespread the problem is. Only about a dozen cases have been described in medical literature since the first one was found, in London in 2003. But AIDS specialists in Brazil, India, Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere are reporting that some patients on life-saving antiretroviral drugs are developing painful facial ulcers or losing feeling in their fingers and toes.

And in the third world, where 390,000 new cases of leprosy were discovered last year and where 38 million are infected with the AIDS virus, the problem will inevitably get worse, experts say.

"This is just the peak of the iceberg," said Dr. William Levis, who treats leprosy patients at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. "It's early in the game. Most physicians don't even think about leprosy, so there's probably much more around than

we know."

Dr. Gilla Kaplan, a professor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and one of the first to study connections between AIDS and leprosy, agreed.

Antiretroviral treatment, she said, "is going to flush out the silent leprosy by making it symptomatic."

Because leprosy, a bacterial disease, can be treated with specialized antibiotics that are supplied free by the Novartis pharmaceutical company, there is little prospect of a worldwide epidemic or large numbers of deaths.

Since the problem is little known, it often takes doctors weeks to figure out what new illness is besetting their AIDS patients.

Experts say the problem arises when the AIDS drugs cause the immune system to recover. It then generates new white blood cells that carry the bacteria from old, silent leprosy infections to the skin of the face, hands and feet.

Depending on symptoms, leprosy is often initially misdiagnosed as arthritis or lupus. Treatment in cities like New York and London is relatively easy, but the real crisis, experts said, will evolve in poor countries with dual epidemics.

The country that most worries experts is India. Not long ago, it had 78 percent of the world's leprosy cases. Its official caseload is a bit of a mystery now. After an aggressive 20-year campaign to find and treat new cases, India officially declared leprosy "eliminated as a public health issue" last year. However, that statement was carefully crafted: it means there is a national average of lower than 1 case per 10,000 citizens, which could be as many as 100,000 new cases a year.

At the same time, with about 5.2 million people infected with the AIDS virus, India is poised to outstrip South Africa as the country with the most AIDS victims. But its epidemic began much later than South Africa's or Brazil's, and it has been slow to roll out AIDS treatment. As treatment grows, leprosy may surge along with it.

Other countries with high numbers of leprosy victims are Myanmar, Madagascar, Nepal and Mozambique.

But there are also big unknowns. "It depends on how good the medical system is," said Dr. Diana N. Lockwood, a leprosy expert at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. "For example, last year, Congo discovered 11,600 new cases."