Leishmaniasis

What is leishmaniasis?
Leishmaniasis (LEASH-ma-NIGH-a-sis) is a parasitic disease spread by the bite of an infected sand fly. There are several forms of leishmaniasis. The most common forms are cutaneous leishmaniasis, which causes skin sores, and visceral leishmaniasis, which may affect some internal organs of the body and affect immune function.

Is leishmaniasis a common disease?
There are about 12 million cases of leishmaniasis in the world. Each year about 1.5 million new cases of cutaneous leishmaniasis and 500,000 cases of visceral leishmaniasis are reported. Leishmaniasis is rare in the United States. On rare occasion, individuals in rural southern Texas develop cutaneous leishmaniasis.

Where could I contract leishmaniasis?
Leishmaniasis is found in parts of about 88 countries, mostly tropical and subtropical regions. The vast majority of visceral leishmaniasis is in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sudan, and Brazil. Leishmaniasis may also be found in Mexico, Central and South America, southern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Leishmaniasis is not found in Australia or the Pacific Islands.

How is leishmaniasis transmitted?
Leishmaniasis is spread by the bite of certain types of sand fly. Sand flies become infected by biting an infected animal. Sand flies are much smaller than mosquitoes and are most active from dusk to dawn. They will bite during the day if disturbed. Leishmaniasis also can be spread by blood transfusions or contaminated needles.

What are the common symptoms?
Common symptoms of cutaneous leishmaniasis include: one or more sores on the skin. Sores may begin like pimples and, with time, change in size and appearance to resemble a crater with a raised edge. Sores may hurt or be covered by a scab. Symptoms of visceral leishmaniasis include: fever, weight loss, an enlarged spleen and liver, swollen glands, and low platelet and red and white blood cell counts.

Is leishmaniasis a serious disease?
It can be. Cutaneous leishmaniasis can produce sores, which may take months or years to heal, and it may produce scarring. The disease can spread to the nose or mouth causing sores and, in rare cases, serious disfigurement. New sores may develop and the parasite may spread years after the original sore heals. Visceral leishmaniasis is lethal if left untreated.

How can leishmaniasis be treated?
There are a variety of treatments for leishmaniasis. Most cases of cutaneous leishmaniasis will heal on their own. Your physician may contact the CDC to determine if, and how, your case of leishmaniasis should be treated.

How can I prevent leishmaniasis?
Protection from sand fly bites is the best way to prevent infection by leishmaniasis. Avoid outdoors, particularly from dusk to dawn. Wear long pants, long sleeves and socks. Use insect repellent liberally. Spray living areas with insecticide. Use a bed net with fine-mesh netting (more than 18 holes/inch) when sleeping.

What about leishmaniasis in animals?
Leishmaniasis is most commonly found in dogs. Common symptoms in dogs include skin lesions, chapping on the muzzle or footpads, dull coat, loss in stamina, and weight loss. Antiprotozoal drugs may be used, but recurrent infections are very likely. To prevent infection, keep dogs indoors one hour before sunset and one hour after dawn during the sand fly season. A vaccine is not available.

Additional Information:
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

This fact sheet is meant to provide basic information. For specific health concerns please contact your physician or veterinarian. Updated 2005.