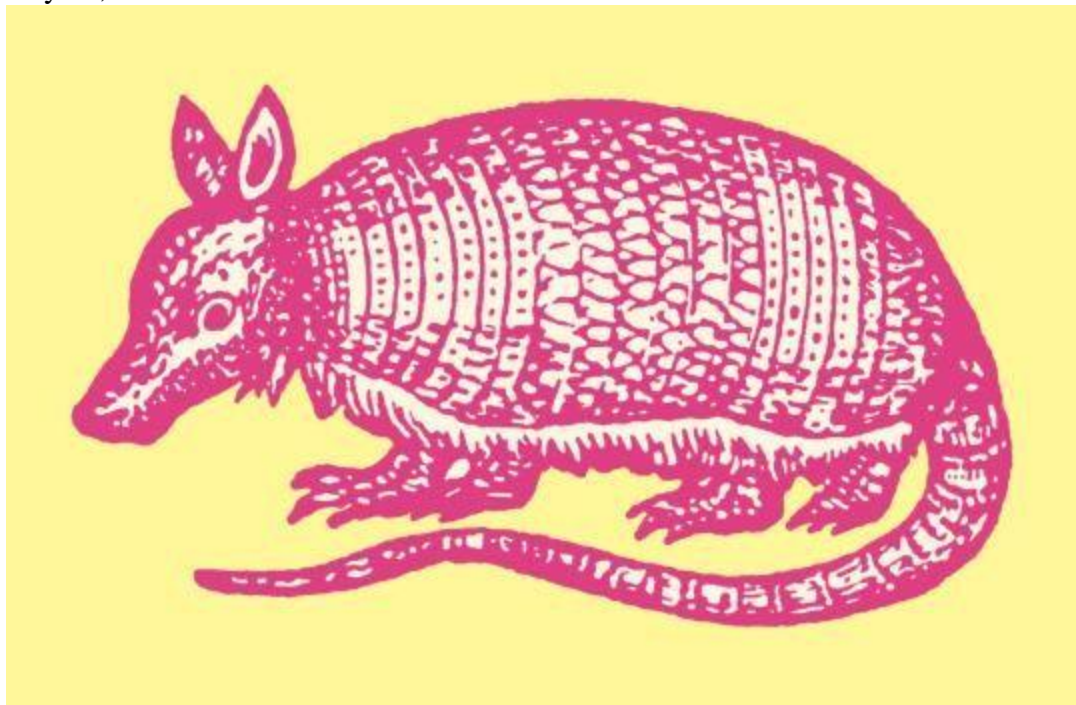


# Florida Is Facing a Leprosy Outbreak. You'll Never Guess What May Be the Cute Culprit

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July 22, 2015



*Certain age groups — adolescents and those over the age of 30 — are more likely to contract leprosy, and men are more at risk than women. (Illustration: Getty Images)*

Diseases you probably thought were obliterated have been making headlines lately. First, there was the [measles outbreak at Disneyland](#) this past winter. Then, cases of the [plague appeared in Colorado](#). And now, Florida is seeing a spike in leprosy cases.

Yes, leprosy is still around.

Florida has seen nine leprosy cases so far this year, but typically only sees an average of four annually, according to the Florida Department of Health. And experts say the reason for the outbreak may be ... armadillos.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), some armadillos are naturally infected with leprosy. The small animals are naturally nocturnal but are now in their breeding season, according to the University of Florida. As a result, they're out more during the day now, when they may come into contact with people.



***Some armadillos are naturally infected with leprosy, and may be inadvertently transmitting it to humans. (Photo: Getty Images)***

While the CDC says the risk of contracting leprosy from armadillos is low, it also states that if you decide to see a doctor due to armadillo contact, you should tell them the full history of the contact you've had with the creatures.

But leprosy cases aren't restricted to this small outbreak: Roughly 7,000 people are now being treated in the U.S. for the disease, and the U.S. sees about 200 new cases a year, says infectious disease expert Dr. Amesh Adalja, an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

### **What Is Leprosy?**

While you've no doubt heard of leprosy, you might be fuzzy on the details. The disease is a chronic bacterial disease that mainly affects a person's skin, peripheral nerves, and upper airway, according to the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#).

Leprosy, which has symptoms ranging from numb, red bumps to physical disfigurement, was renamed to Hansen's Disease due to the stigma surrounding its former name.

Leprosy is a historically feared disease — the Hawaiian island of Molokai was a leprosy colony in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and lepers were once treated as outcasts. But despite its scary past, today, it's treatable.

### **Leprosy Is Treatable**

People diagnosed with leprosy are typically given antibiotics for up to two years depending on the severity of the case, Adalja said, adding that the infection is no longer contagious after a few doses. Armadillos aren't the only ones responsible for the spread of leprosy: It's possible to contract the disease from another person. However, the CDC says, it typically happens to people who are in "prolonged close contact" with those who have leprosy and aren't being treated for it.

Adalja stresses that leprosy is a "fairly rare" disease that isn't highly contagious, but says some people may be more at risk than others.

Certain age groups — adolescents and people older than 30 — are more likely to contract leprosy, and men are more at risk than women. Genetics are also at play: The [CDC reports](#) that 95 percent of adults are naturally unable to get the disease even if they're exposed to it.

Leprosy also tends to show up in some states more than others. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, says 65 percent of new cases in 2010 (the most recent year for which data is available) were reported in California, Florida, Hawaii, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, and Texas.

So, should you be worried? No, says Adalja. However, if you notice signs of leprosy, such as red bumps that are numb to the touch, seek medical care immediately. "If people aren't diagnosed and treated quickly enough, they may have some permanent damage," says Adalja.

Oh, and don't play with armadillos.