

# Disfiguring tropical disease surges in Afghanistan

October 15 2010, By ROBERT KENNEDY , Associated Press Writer

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(AP) -- An outbreak of a tropical disease caused by sand fly bites that leaves disfiguring skin sores has hit Afghanistan, with tens of thousands of people infected, health officials said Friday.

Cutaneous leishmaniasis is a parasitic [disease](#) transmitted by the female phlebotomine sand fly - an insect only 2-3 millimeters long that requires the blood of humans or animals so its eggs can develop. Treatable with medication and not life-threatening, cutaneous leishmaniasis can leave severe scars on the bodies of victims.

The disease threatens 13 million people in Afghanistan, the [World Health Organization](#) said, and many impoverished Afghan victims can't afford the medication to treat it.

In Kabul - described by the WHO as "the world capital of cutaneous leishmaniasis" - the number of cases jumped from an estimated 17,000 a year in the early 2000s to 65,000 in 2009, WHO said.

Most victims are women and children. WHO said women and children are more vulnerable because they mostly live indoors at night, where the sand flies prefer to bite, and are therefore more susceptible than men who are generally outside the home.

Peter Graaff, WHO representative to Afghanistan, told The Associated Press on Friday that the stigma and shame attached to the disfiguring disease results in underreporting, and the number of infected people is

likely much higher.

"This number is likely to be the tip of the iceberg as cases are grossly underreported," said Graaff.

An outbreak has occurred in a small village in western Herat province's Kohsan district with 63 people infected since August, Graaff said.

The cause of the outbreak was unknown and a WHO team has been dispatched to investigate, he said.

The sand flies proliferate from June to September. They thrive in unsanitary conditions such as piles of garbage and debris, though bed nets offer protection from their bites. As the disfiguring sores grow larger, many suffer social stigmatization.

"The high cost of treatment makes it difficult to integrate anti-Leishmaniasis drugs," said Dr. Suraya Dalil, acting minister of public health. "I urge donors to take this cause seriously, as it causes unnecessary suffering amongst a large number of Afghans."

According to the WHO as many as 12 million people are infected worldwide with the disease, with about 1 million to 2 million new cases annually.

**More information:** <http://www.who.int/leishmaniasis/en/>

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