

# Care of Hand and Feet in Leprosy

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**P**EOPLE continue to fear leprosy because of ignorance and lack of information regarding the disease. Disfigurement and crippling deformities are due to complications of the disease and are preventable.

Great part of stigma is due to ulcers in leprosy. Leprosy in itself does not cause ulcer. Attitudes regarding the disease must be improved and corrected. One method of accomplishing this is through Education, not only of the patient but also of their families and the public. Leprosy is curable. Deformities are preventable. Most of the deformities that have already developed can be corrected. The nurses play a great role in educating the patients to prevent these deformities.

In leprosy due to nerve damage the hands and feet often become anaesthetic. That means the patient cannot feel temperature, pain, or pressure in these areas. These sensations normally provide a warning which prevents damage to the tissues. The reflex action which results from a painful stimulus is important for preventing injury. Where there is anaesthesia this reflex is lost. For these reasons the patient is very likely to injure his hands and feet.

## Loss of Thermal Sensation

This means he may burn himself easily, e.g.:

1. When the patient picks up a cup of very hot tea he cannot feel the temperature and there is no protective reflex to make him put it down quickly.

2. When cooking, the pots and lids may be lifted without realizing they are too hot.

3. When a patient smokes a cigarette it may burn right down to his fingers without him noticing.

4. When he walks on a hot tar road he may burn his feet.

## No Feeling of Pain

This means he may easily injure himself getting cuts, pricks, etc., e.g.:

1. When he walks on rough ground he cannot feel sharp stones.

2. When gathering firewood he cannot feel thorns or splinters piercing the skin.

## No Feeling of Pressure

This means that the patient is likely to injure his hands by using them too powerfully. e.g.:

1. When he holds a tool handle he cannot feel it, so he grasps it tighter than necessary and bruises the tissues of his hands.

2. When unscrewing some things very tight, he may succeed but may crush or crack the bones of his fingers. In some cases the small bones

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are soft due to decalcification.

## Precautions

Health teaching should be given to the patients and their families. Patient should take certain precautions before doing some of the activities to prevent damage to his hands and feet.

The patient should be taught to take the following precautions to avoid injuries:

- The mug of tea or coffee must always be held with a few layers of cloth or special wooden handle.

- Cooking pots and lids should either be held with cloth or have wooden handles attached to the vessels for handling the same.

- Utensils for stirring food should be done with long wooden spoons or else have wooden handles fixed over the metal ones.

- Steam will cause blister and so the hands must be covered by cloth while cooking.

- While smoking one should use a cigarette holder.

- If the handle of the tool is rough it should be made smooth or it can be padded by means of cloth tied around it.

- Wearing special shoe with microcellular rubber is the chief precaution for the anaesthetic feet against burns and wounds.

- A patient must soak his feet thoroughly and apply oil regularly. This will prevent the skin from becoming dry. Dryness of skin leads to cracks.

- Patient should form a habit of inspecting his feet and hands every morning for any blister, swelling, or thorn and look for any injury due to these.

Patients should be taught how to do these activities without damage to themselves. Only then they will be able to take a normal place in society.

Certain activities must not be allowed, e.g.:

1. Patients should not warm their hands directly over a fire.

2. Patients must not lift heavy objects if they have a claw hand, for, all the pressure will go on the finger-tips which will damage tissues.

3. Patients should not walk long distance at a stretch.

4. Patient with anaesthetic hands should not do vigorous rough work.

5. Iron tongs left near the fire may become very hot and should not be handled by the patient.

## References:

1. **A Comprehensive Nursing Manual of Patients with Leprosy** by Sr. Joanna Hooe.

2. **Manual of Leprosy** by Dr. R. H. Thangaraj.

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