

Kala-Azar

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In news– Eleven districts of Bengal have recently reported at least 65 cases of black fever or 'Kala-Azar' disease.

What is Kala-Azar?

- Kala-azar or Visceral Leishmaniasis is a **protozoan parasitic disease, spread by sandfly bites.**
- **Sandflies are brown in colour and have hairs on their bodies.** The flies are infected with the **parasite called 'leishmania donovani'**.
- The **vector sandfly is known to live in cracks and crevices of muddy houses**, especially in dark and humid corners.
- **According to the WHO, there are 3 main forms of leishmaniasis –**
 1. Visceral (also known as kala-azar, which is the most serious form of the disease).
 2. Cutaneous (the most common), and causes skin lesions, mainly ulcers, on exposed parts of the body.
 3. Mucocutaneous- It leads to partial or total destruction of mucous membranes of the nose, mouth and throat.
- The **disease affects some of the poorest people and is linked to malnutrition**, population displacement, poor housing, a weak immune system and a lack of financial resources.
- Leishmaniasis is **also linked to environmental changes such as deforestation**, and urbanisation, according to WHO.
- The disease is known to be fatal in over 95 per cent of the cases, if left untreated.
- **Irregular bouts of fever over many days, weight loss, enlargement of the spleen and liver, and anaemia are known symptoms.**

- **The skin may become dry, thin and scaly in patches** and hair may be lost. In people with a light skin tone, greyish discolouration of the skin of hands, feet, abdomen and face may be seen, that is why the disease is also called “Black fever”.
- **It is a treatable and curable disease**, which requires an immunocompetent system and thus those having a weak immune system are prone to get severely affected.
- **Anti-leishmanial medicines** are available for treatment. **Vector control** is also recommended by the WHO, which means reducing or interrupting the transmission of disease by decreasing the number of sandflies in surroundings through insecticide spray, use of insecticide-treated nets, etc.
- In 2020, more than 90 per cent of new cases reported to WHO occurred in 10 countries: Brazil, China, Ethiopia, Eritrea, India, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen.

Kala-Azar disease in India-

- **The disease is endemic in Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.** An estimated 165.4 million people are at risk, according to data from the National Centre for Vector Borne Disease Control Programme (NCVBDC).
- In the country as a whole, there has been a significant decline in cases over the years. In 2014, around 9,200 cases were reported while in 2021 the number fell to 1,276 cases.
- **In West Bengal, the districts where the maximum number of cases were registered include Darjeeling,** Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Kalimpong.
- **The government aimed to eliminate the disease in India by 2015,** but that deadline was missed. However, the number of cases has been brought down significantly through the **National Kala-Azar Elimination Programme.**

- **Medicines, insecticides and technical support** were given by the central government, while state governments provided for costs involved in implementation.