



Anyone can contract tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is endemic to South Africa and active TB was the leading underlying cause of death for young South Africans aged 15 to 34 years in 2013 (StatsSA 2015). World TB Day marks the anniversary of Dr Robert Koch's announcement in 1882 that he had discovered *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, the bacteria that causes TB. To commemorate World TB Day on 24 March, we'd like to tell you more about this communicable disease.

From contact to disease

Active TB (or TB disease) is a serious airborne infection that usually affects the lungs, but it can also develop in any other part of the body. Anyone can contract active TB, but people who have weak immune systems due to conditions like lupus and HIV are more likely to become ill. Active TB can be cured by taking antibiotics. Without treatment, TB can be deadly.

Healthcare Professionals speak about active TB disease if you have symptoms because it is possible to be exposed to tuberculosis bacteria without becoming ill. This is called latent TB. People with latent TB cannot infect others. Without treatment about 5% to 10% of people with latent TB will later develop active TB.

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms of active TB depend on where in the body the TB bacteria grows. Active TB in the lungs (the most common kind of active TB) may cause symptoms such as:

- A bad cough that lasts three weeks or longer
- Pain in the chest
- Coughing up blood or sputum (phlegm from deep inside the lungs).

Other symptoms of TB disease are:

- Weakness or fatigue
- Weight loss
- No appetite
- Chills
- Fever
- Sweating at night.

When to see your GP

Visit your GP if you are concerned that you may have TB or if you have been in contact with someone who has active TB. Your GP may do a skin test to see if you've come into contact with the TB bacteria at some point in your life. If the skin test is positive, they may do further tests to see if you have active TB.

Treatment

Active TB can be cured by taking a combination of special antibiotics. In South Africa, the standard treatment is usually a combination of three or four antibiotics that are taken over a period of two months.

The most common reason treatment fails is because patients do not take their medication correctly and regularly, as prescribed by the doctor. It is vital to follow the doctor's instructions. Even if you feel much better in a few weeks (as many people do) you must finish the full course of treatment.

Drug-resistant TB can develop if people with TB do not take their medication as prescribed or do not finish the full course of antibiotics. This condition is much more difficult to treat than active TB.