How is tuberculosis treated?

Tuberculosis is always treated using a combination of drugs. If you are being treated for tuberculosis for the first time – that is, you have not had tuberculosis before – you will need to take four drugs for two months, followed by a combination of two drugs for another four months. In other words, you will need to take medicine for six months in order to cure the tuberculosis.

If you've had tuberculosis before, you will probably receive five drugs to take for two months. In the third month, you will only receive four drugs for one month. After that, you'll take three drugs for another five months. In other words, you will need to take medicine for eight months in order to cure the tuberculosis.

You may ask your doctor about each of the medicines you will receive. These medicines can cause side effects and you should know what they are and what you should do if they occur. Here are a few things to keep in mind and to discuss with your doctor:

- If you are a woman and are taking a pill to avoid becoming pregnant, you should discuss this with your doctor. One of the medicines used to treat tuberculosis (rifampicin) can lower the amount of the pregnancy pill in your body. In other words, you might become pregnant while taking rifampicin and the pregnancy pill. To prevent this from happening, you and your doctor should discuss alternative forms of birth control.
- The drug streptomycin is sometimes used to treat tuberculosis. If you are over the age of 65, you should not use this drug.
- The drug ethambutol is always used to treat tuberculosis. If you are caring for a child who has tuberculosis and he or she is under the age of 8, this drug should not be used.
- Rifampicin may cause your urine and sometimes your saliva to turn red or orange. This is not harmful.

Other side effects to know about include: loss of appetite, stomach pains/nausea, joint pains, burning sensations in the feet, skin itching/rash, altered vision (strange colour changes), and difficulty hearing. You should tell your doctor about any side effects you have while taking these drugs. Do not stop these drugs on your own.

It is very important that you take these drugs correctly. Even if you feel better after a few months, this does not mean that the bacteria are gone from your body. You should not skip doses and you should keep taking the medicine until your doctor tells you to stop. If you stop taking these drugs too early, the tuberculosis may return and will be harder to treat.

To make sure that you take your medicine correctly – and take the pills for the correct amount of time – somebody will need to watch you take your pills. This is called direct observation of treatment (DOT) and it is strongly recommended by the HIV/AIDS Policy Guideline. Because you will need to take several drugs, sometimes five times a week and sometimes three times a week, treating TB can be confusing. Having someone help you take these pills can be very helpful and is the best way to cure the infection.

Some people will need to return to their clinic every time they need to take their medication. At the clinic, a nurse or another staff person will give you your pills, watch you swallow them, and then sign a card confirming that you took your dose.