

# TUBERCULOSIS (TB) IN SOUTH AFRICA

## FACTSHEET

# #WEDIEOFTB

South Africa has one of the highest rates of tuberculosis (TB) in the world and TB is the leading cause of death<sup>1</sup>. Globally 1.5 million died from TB in 2013<sup>2</sup>. **Yet importantly TB is both curable and preventable.**

Many things have contributed to the spread of the TB epidemic in South Africa, such as overcrowded, unventilated housing and public transport conditions, poverty, lack of good nutrition, alcoholism, illegal drugs, overcrowding and poor access to treatment in prisons and poor mining conditions. These conditions, still largely unchallenged, create conditions likely to drive the spread of TB. **But TB can affect anyone, in any walk of life.**

TB is caused by bacteria that most often affect the lungs and is spread from person to person through the air. This is called pulmonary TB. **Coughing and sneezing can spread TB easily.** TB droplets can stay in the air for days in crowded, humid and dark enclosed spaces.

However, **TB doesn't only affect the lungs**, it can affect any part of your body except for your hair and nails. This is called extra-pulmonary TB. In extra-pulmonary TB the primary TB infection is still the lungs, but TB bacteria also accesses the blood stream and spreads through the body to other places like the bones, brain, kidneys etc.

**TB can be either latent or active.** Latent TB means that you have the TB bacteria in your body, but your body's immune system keeps it from turning into active TB. This means that you don't have any symptoms of TB and can't spread the disease to others. If you have latent TB, it can become active TB. An estimated 80% of people in South Africa have latent TB<sup>3</sup>. Active TB means that the TB is growing and causing symptoms. If your lungs are infected with active TB, it is easy to spread the disease to others.

TB can make people sick in different ways. Usually a person with TB has a persistent cough that lasts for weeks. The cough is worse at night and sometimes causes vomiting. TB makes you lose weight as it affects the appetite. It causes high fevers with cold chills and sweating. Also, TB makes you feel very tired. When a person develops active TB, the most common symptoms may be mild for many months. This can lead to delays in seeking care, and result in transmission to others. **People ill with TB can infect up to 10-15 other people through close contact over the course of a year.** Without proper treatment up to two thirds of people ill with TB will die<sup>4</sup>.

**Infection control is important to halt the spread of TB** particularly in crowded places, households and among those people more susceptible to TB (like people living with HIV and children). The best way to avoid transmission is to keep windows open and keep areas around you ventilated. But even just sharing a room or a taxi with someone who has untreated TB puts you at risk. Basic infection control includes covering your mouth when coughing, ensuring proper ventilation in homes, health facilities and crowded spaces, identifying TB in its early stages by getting screened and tested, educating people on infection control and TB, and adhering to TB treatment properly.

**Treating TB can be difficult, but it can be cured**, even in people who are HIV positive. It is treated with a six-month course of four drugs. If you take the medication properly, your symptoms will improve after two months. But it is important that you continue to take the medicines for the full course of the treatment.

However standard TB drugs have been used for decades, and resistance to the medicines is growing. The main cause of drug resistance is inappropriate treatment or not adhering to the treatment properly. Increasingly now first-time TB patients, are being infected with the drug-resistant strain. **Drug resistant TB (DR TB) is much harder to treat, involving taking as many as 14,600 pills over a two-year period** - as well as a painful daily injection for the first six months. The treatment often comes with problematic side effects including nausea, vomiting, hallucinations, diarrhoea, suicidal feelings, and even deafness.

HIV and TB form a lethal combination, each speeding the other's progress. Someone who is living with HIV and TB is much more likely to become sick with active TB. **Globally approximately 25% of deaths among people living with HIV are due to TB<sup>5</sup>.**

<sup>1</sup> "Mortality and causes of death in South Africa, 2013: Findings from death notification". Stats SA, December 2014. Available at: <http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03093/P030932013.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Tuberculosis Fact sheet No. 104. WHO, October 2014. Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs104/en/>

<sup>3</sup> "National Strategic Plan on HIV, STIs and TB 2012 - 2016". SANAC, 2011. Available at: [www.health.gov.za/docs/strategic/2012/NSPfull.pdf](http://www.health.gov.za/docs/strategic/2012/NSPfull.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Tuberculosis Fact sheet No. 104. WHO, October 2014. Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs104/en/>

<sup>5</sup> Tuberculosis Fact sheet No. 104. WHO, October 2014. Available at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs104/en/>