

## **BASIC FACTS ABOUT TUBERCULOSIS (TB)**

### **What is TB or Tuberculosis?**

- Tuberculosis, or TB is a chronic infectious disease caused by a bacterium called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*.
- It usually affects the lungs, but can attack other parts of the body.
- TB can also attack the brain as a deadly form of meningitis.
- TB in the lungs or throat can be infectious i.e. the bacteria can spread to other people, but the TB in other parts of the body is usually not infectious.
- A person can be infected by the TB organism for many years without getting sick or spreading the disease to others.
- If the immune system is weakened for some reason (like in HIV positive people) TB can develop into active disease.

### **HOW IS TB SPREAD TO OTHER PEOPLE?**

- TB is spread mainly through the air. When infectious people cough, sneeze, talk, laugh or spit, droplets containing bacteria are sprayed into the air.
- People nearby may inhale these bacteria and become infected. Bacteria can stay in the air-borne for a long time and can remain active in house dust for weeks. However transmission usually occurs only after substantial exposure to someone with active TB.
- People with TB are likely to spread it to those they spend time with daily, such as family members and co-workers.
- You are likely to get TB from someone coughing in public. You cannot get TB from handshakes, toilet seats, or sharing eating utensils, bedclothes or clothing with people who have TB.

### **WHAT ARE THE TB WARNING SIGNS?**

The following are some of the warning signs for possible TB infection.

- A cough that starts out dry but later produces sputum (thick liquid from deep inside the lungs) or blood.
- Coughing for longer than a month.
- Chest pain, breathing difficulty e.g. shortness of breath.

- Weakness or fatigue, Loss of weight and appetite.
- Chills and fevers (the fever may be low, and may be intermittent).
- Joint pains, hearing loss.
- Wheezing, excessive sweating, including sweating at night.
- Diarrhoea
- A persistent lump or lesion.
- Clubbing of fingers or toes-the nails become swollen and feel slightly pulpy.

### **HIGH RISK FACTORS THAT PREDISPOSE ONE TO TB INFECTION**

People with HIV infection have a high risk of developing TB infection because:

- HIV weakens the immune system, people with both TB and HIV infection are at high risk of developing TB disease.
- If you are HIV positive, you are 30 times more likely to get active TB once infected than someone infected with TB who is HIV negative.
- People with HIV should be screened for TB-if found positive treatment can be initiated at an early stage.
- Anti-cancer chemotherapy may a risk factor for developing TB infection.
- People who have been in close contact with someone who has infectious TB
- People who became infected with TB in the last two years.
- Babies and young children
- People who inject drugs

People with other conditions that weaken the immune system especially:

- Diabetes mellitus
- Silicosis
- Leukaemia or Hodgkin's disease
- Severe kidney disease
- Low birth weight
- Elderly people
- Low-income groups with poor health care access.
- People living in crowded places, e.g. shelters or prisons.
- People exposed to TB through their work, such as health care workers.

## **WHEN SHOULD ONE SEEK MEDICAL HELP?**

- Seek medical care if you have been exposed to TB or if you experience any of the warning signs.
- If the warning signs persist despite the treatment.
- If new warning signs develop.
- You should be tested for TB if you have spent time with someone with infectious TB.
- If you have HIV infection or another condition that puts you at high risk for TB disease.
- When you think that you may have TB disease.
- Live where TB disease is common (homeless, hostels, prisons or some nursing homes).

## **HOW IS TB TREATED?**

People with active TB are usually treated with several anti-TB drugs this is more effective in killing all bacteria and preventing them from becoming drug resistant.

- Over 95% of people properly treated for TB are cured. The main reason treatments fail is that people do not take their medications properly.
- Medicines given to people with TB disease usually stop them from spreading the TB bacteria within a few weeks.
- It may be necessary to be hospitalised initially to prevent the spread of bacteria (usually two to four weeks after starting treatment), once this period is over one can continue with normal activity while taking medication.
- It takes at least six months for the medicine to kill the bacteria, one will probably start feeling well after only a few weeks of treatment, but it is important that medication is taken regularly.
- Living in a healthy environment with clean dry air, eating healthy foods high in Vitamin C, reduced stress, improves treatment response.
- Joining a support group where members share common experiences may alleviate the stress of the illness.