

TUBERCULOSIS – A TOPICAL SUBJECT IN GERMANY, TOO



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DEAR READER,

Tuberculosis is one of the most frequent infectious diseases in the world. According to estimates, around 9 million people contract this disease every year and it is the cause of death of more than one million people annually.

Many people are mainly familiar with tuberculosis from historical works and they associate it with images of sanatoriums in the mountains. In Germany the disease has become rare thanks to good care and hygiene. Nonetheless, over 4,000 people are affected by it every year in this country too.

► THE DISEASE

Tuberculosis (in short: TB) is a contagious disease. It is triggered by bacteria and transmitted from one person to another.

The bacteria mainly invade the lungs. Infected individuals expel germ-containing droplets when speaking, sneezing or coughing which other people inhale. But not everyone who comes into contact with the bacteria becomes sick. The body's own defences fight the pathogens and often render them harmless. Sometimes, the bacteria remain dormant in the body for years. The disease breaks out in one in ten people and has to be treated. People in close contact with patients with contagious pulmonary tuberculosis and people with a weakened immune system are affected the most. The following groups are particularly at risk, for example:

- HIV and AIDS patients
- Infants, toddlers and elderly people
- People on long-term medication to suppress the immune system
- People who are drug or alcohol dependent

When the immune system is compromised, bacteria can spread in the body, amongst other things, to lymph nodes, bones, the urinary tract or cerebral membranes.

► SYMPTOMS AND COMPLAINTS

Tuberculosis can develop without the affected person noticing. It often begins insidiously and the complaints are frequently not clear:

- Slight or pronounced cough with or without sputum
- Unwanted weight loss
- Fatigue
- Slight temperature
- Night sweating

The complaints last for weeks. If left untreated, they normally get worse. In the case of a persistent cough, experts recommend a lung X-ray to establish the cause. If tuberculosis is suspected, the diagnosis is confirmed by the detection of bacteria, for instance in sputum.

► MANDATORY NOTIFICATION

Doctors are obliged by law to notify tuberculosis requiring treatment to the health authorities. In the case of contagious tuberculosis they then arrange for screening of people in close contact with the infected individual. This is called shared air space screening. People who have become infected can then receive timely preventive treatment.

The aim is to prevent an outbreak and further spread of the disease.

► TREATMENT

If left untreated around 7 out of 10 infected individuals die of tuberculosis. In most cases it can be successfully treated. In the case of resistances (see overleaf) the prospects of recovery are, however, far less good. The standard treatment for patients is six months of medication to kill the bacteria. In the first 2 months patients are given 4 different medications.

▶ Tuberculosis

▶ TREATMENT

In the following 4 months treatment involves 2 active ingredients. They are taken every day in parallel. Treatment should be tailored to the patient's needs. As several medications are taken over a prolonged period, cooperation between the patient, doctor and health authority is very important. With this in mind, several counselling and support offerings are available.

In the initial stages many patients are contagious. For that reason they are isolated at home or in a clinic. It's important for the affected individuals to wear a mask to limit the spread of germs. It is crucial for patients to take their medication correctly. Once they are no longer contagious, they are again free to go about their daily lives.

In general the active ingredients are well-tolerated but they may also have side-effects. Doctors regularly check their patients' health condition in order to identify any complications arising from treatment earlier. One medication may be exchanged for another.

Experts recommend offering every tuberculosis patient counselling and an HIV test. If the test is positive, the HIV illness is treated as well.

▶ TREATMENT PROBLEM: RESISTANCES

Bacteria are becoming increasingly insensitive – resistant – to the main medicinal products and this is a problem. Resistances of this kind mainly occur because the medicinal products are not used correctly. The disease known as multi-resistant tuberculosis is more difficult to treat and is often contagious for a longer period. Treatment normally lasts 20 months and should only be administered in an experienced centre.

▶ MORE INFORMATION

Sources, methodology and other useful links

The Patient Information is based on the latest scientific research findings and on recommendations for patients from patients.

You can access all the sources used, the methodology document and other useful links here:

www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/quellen-und-methodik/tuberkulose

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▶ WHAT YOU CAN DO

- You can protect yourself from infection by keeping your distance from people who are coughing, and by complying with general hygiene rules.
- If you have a persistent, undiagnosed cough, go and see your doctor.
- Vaccination against tuberculosis is no longer recommended in Germany.

If you have tuberculosis:

- Take each of your medications regularly, in full and for the prescribed duration. Don't become lax even when you start feeling better. A relapse not only means the disease will last longer; further treatment will also be more difficult.
- Taking your medication after a light meal can improve tolerance.
- If possible, avoid alcohol consumption. Almost all medicines are broken down by the liver. Alcohol can impair successful treatment.
- Tobacco is particularly harmful in the case of pulmonary tuberculosis. Try not to smoke.
- Go for regular check-ups during and after treatment. Any side-effects of the medication, ineffective treatment or a relapse can be identified early on.

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