

Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is an airborne disease caused by a germ called Mycobacterium. It usually affects the lung, but it can also affect other organs like lymph nodes, the brain and kidney. There are between 6,000 and 7,000 new TB cases each year in Hong Kong.

Symptoms of TB include persistent coughing, afternoon fever, night sweating, blood-stained sputum and loss of body weight. Some patients don't show any of these signs.

TB can be spotted through chest x-rays and by examining a person's sputum. Once confirmed, patients should start treatment immediately. The usual course of using drugs to cure the patient lasts between six and nine months. TB can be cured by so-called 'first line' antibiotics such as isoniazid, rifampin, streptomycin, and ethambutol. But if a patient does not respond to these first line antibiotics, which happens often, second line antibiotics are used. These second line drugs include pyrazinamide, ofloxacin, ethionamide and kanamycin.

Some TBs, called XDRTB, are very resistant to drugs and are therefore difficult to treat. There is a high number of such cases in Africa. The number of XDRTB cases in the United States is also growing, accounting for a rising mortality rate. In most cases, lack of effective medicine is to blame, particularly in developing countries.

Leading a healthy lifestyle is the best way to prevent TB. Old people and people with HIV and silicosis are vulnerable to the disease as are families that have a member or members suffering from it. People showing signs of the disease should seek medical advice early.