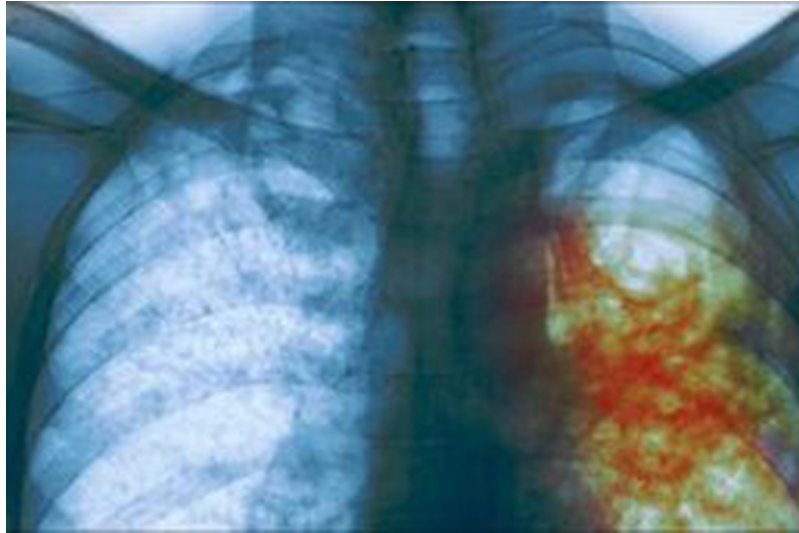


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Europe's tuberculosis spreading fast

High levels of infection prompts the World Health Organisation to draw plans to tackle the "alarming rate."

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Five of the 27 countries with high cases of TB are in the World Health Organisation's European region [EPA]

Forms of tuberculosis are spreading at an alarming rate in Europe and will kill thousands unless health authorities halt the pandemic, the World Health Organisation has said. Eastern Europe has the highest level of infection, while in western Europe, London has the highest TB rate of any capital city.

Launching a new regional plan to find, diagnose and treat cases of the airborne infectious disease more effectively, the WHO's European director warned on Wednesday that complacency had allowed a resurgence of TB and failure to tackle it now would mean huge human and economic costs in the future. "TB is an old disease that never went away, and now it is evolving with a vengeance," Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO's regional director for Europe, said.

TB is currently a worldwide pandemic that kills around 1.7 million people a year. The infection is caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and destroys patients' lung tissue, causing them to cough up the bacteria, which then spreads through the air and can be inhaled by others.

According to the WHO 15 of the 27 countries with high cases of TB are in the WHO's European region, which includes 53 countries in Europe and Central Asia. Cases of multidrug-resistant (MDR-TB) and extensively drug-resistant TB (XDR-TB) - where the infections are resistant to first-line and then second-line antibiotic treatments - are spreading fast, with about 440,000 new patients every year around the world.

Rise of TB

More than 80,000 MDR-TB cases occur in the region each year, almost a fifth of the world's total.

WHO said precise figures for XDR-TB are not available because most countries lack the facilities to diagnose it, but officially reported cases of XDR-TB increased six-fold between 2008 and 2009.

Treating even normal TB is a long and unpleasant process, with patients needing to take a combination of powerful antibiotics for six months. Many patients fail to correctly complete the course of medicines, a factor which has fueled a rise in drug-resistant forms of the disease.

Experts say around seven per cent of patients with straightforward TB die, and that death rate rises to around 50

per cent of patients with drug-resistant forms.

WHO's action plan for tackling tuberculosis emphasises the need for doctors and patients to be more aware of the disease and its symptoms, to diagnose and treat cases promptly with the right drugs, and follow patients up over many months or years to ensure they take their medications.

The WHO said that if the plan is fully implemented at estimated cost of \$5bn, 127,000 people will be successfully treated for drug-resistant TB and 120,000 deaths will be averted by 2015.