

## What is tuberculosis?

**Tuberculosis (TB)** is a disease caused by bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. It most commonly affects the lungs but can be found in many parts of the body. When it affects the lungs it is called pulmonary tuberculosis. When it affects other parts of the body it is called **extra-pulmonary tuberculosis**.

The TB bacteria spread through the air in tiny droplets released when someone with infectious pulmonary TB coughs or sneezes. A person becomes infected by breathing these infected droplets into the lungs. **TB infection is very common**. It is estimated that one in three of the world's population has been infected with TB bacteria. Most people come to no harm from breathing in the bacteria but **about 1 in 10 people will fall sick** when the bacteria grow causing active disease. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 9 million people develop the disease and **1,500,000 people die of TB each year**. TB is the most common cause of adult death in parts of Africa. Anyone can develop TB but people with weakened immune systems or damaged lungs are more vulnerable.

The TB bacteria grow very slowly, and they are more difficult to kill than other bacteria. The **treatment lasts at least six months** and a cocktail of drugs is used. Great care must be taken to complete the treatment to prevent resistance arising to the antibiotics.

**TB is difficult to diagnose**. The symptoms often progress slowly and may be attributed to other causes (cough, weight loss, night sweats etc). Pulmonary TB is tested by taking a sample of sputum from the lungs which is examined to see if the bacteria are present. Extra-pulmonary samples need to be taken from the site of the disease. Current tests for most types of extra-pulmonary TB are not very sensitive.

It is estimated that **1 in 3 TB patients do not get the care they need** and increasing detection rates is a **global health priority**.