

Eyes and ears

Smoking increases the risk of tuberculosis

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An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

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Evidence from three separate research programmes has shown that smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke significantly increase the risk of tuberculosis (TB).

Up to one-fifth of TB may be linked to smoking, according to Karen Slama, head of the tobacco control department at the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease.

"A significant proportion, probably more than 20 percent, of the global TB burden may be attributable to smoking," Slama said. ". . . there is convincing evidence that tobacco use can affect the entire chain [of the disease], with cumulative effect."

Research presented by Slama and others this week at the 38th Union World Conference on Lung Health in Cape Town, shows that tobacco affects each stage of Tb development: It increases the risk of TB infection, acts as a catalyst for the development of the disease and can cause death in TB patients.

Tobacco should therefore be added to the list of factors that determine the risk of TB, along with HIV and poverty, the scientists claimed. There are also fears that the use of tobacco could potentially be a co-factor in the spread of drug-resistant strains of the disease.

This deals a major blow to developing countries, where the number of people who smoke is high and communities already face high incidence rates of HIV, TB and poverty.

Tobacco kills five million people every year and this number is expected to increase to 30 million by 2030. Put these sombre statistics in the context of the number of people succumbing to HIV, and it is clear that TB represents a serious threat to humanity.

But unlike HIV and other factors that increase TB risk, tobacco-related deaths are easily preventable. "The good thing is we know what interventions work," the Director of Tobacco Control at the Union and World Lung Foundation (UWLF), Sinead Jones, added during a briefing.

"We all know how organised Stop TB efforts have been. This is an identified opportunity. We need to educate health workers and TB patients on this issue," said Jones. "If we strengthen tobacco control, we control TB."

She said that the introduction of higher tax rates, the eliminating of tobacco advertising, increased funding for TB control programmes and package warnings are all measures that have worked in some countries to reduce tobacco intake.

But experts are sceptical about what 'appropriate' warnings would be. "What would be a fair warning for a product that addicts children, kills when used exactly as intended and kills five million people a year worldwide?" asked Yussuf Salooje of the South African National Council

Against Smoking at the conference.

"This is very important information and now we have it," Slama concluded.

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