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New test gives one-hour TB diagnosis: scientists

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Scientists have developed a new test which can diagnose tuberculosis in one hour, potentially helping to curb the spread of the disease, a British health agency said in a study Wednesday.

The "ultra-rapid" test is far quicker than traditional methods, which can take up to eight weeks and mean that patients, who are often from transient populations, move on untreated, said the Health Protection Agency (HPA).

"We're excited to have developed this new test because it means we can potentially diagnose someone at a TB clinic within an hour and start them immediately on the treatment they need," said Cath Arnold of the HPA, who led the study.

"This new test could really have an impact where it is most needed."

The new, highly sensitive test works by identifying a single molecule of DNA in the TB bacterium.

Current tests involve taking mucus from sufferers and growing a bacterial culture in the laboratory, which can take weeks.

"It will be a lot more effective," HPA spokeswoman Emma Gilgunn-Jones told AFP.

"Up to 75 percent of people with TB are transient and it is difficult if

they are not treated straightaway because they can move on and infect people."

But it could be at least two years before the test appears on the market as it must now undergo extensive clinical trials which are starting in Britain soon, she added.

The agency's findings are due to be presented at a conference at the University of Warwick in central England on Wednesday.

The announcement comes less than two weeks after US researchers said they had developed a new test also using genetic markers that could diagnose drug-resistant TB in two hours.

Tuberculosis killed an estimated 1.8 million people worldwide in 2008, according to the World Health Organisation, with the disease spreading fastest in South East Asia.

Drug-resistant TB is becoming a serious threat to global health, especially as only a small proportion of cases are diagnosed, the WHO warned. Almost half the drug-resistant cases were estimated to have occurred in China and India.

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