

Myanmar must act fast to curb drug resistant TB, experts say

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Health officials called Thursday for urgent action to tackle "alarming" rates of drug-resistant tuberculosis in Myanmar where nearly 9,000 people catch the strain of the infectious disease each year.

Treatment programmes in the impoverished nation—where the [healthcare system](#) was left woefully underfunded during decades of military rule—are expensive and ineffective leaving the deadly illness to spread unchecked, experts warned at a Yangon forum on the issue.

"Forms of TB that cannot be treated with standard drugs are presenting at an alarming rate in the country, with an estimated 8,900 people newly infected each year," Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said in a statement.

The drug-resistant strain can still be treated, but analysis has shown that patients often have to take up to 20 pills a day and endure months of painful injections—although even up to two years of medication is not guaranteed to work.

"Yet only a fraction—800 by the end of 2012—receive treatment. Untreated, the airborne and infectious disease is fatal," it said, adding care for the drug-resistant strain must "scale up country-wide to save lives and stem the unchecked crises".

Myanmar, which is undergoing sweeping political and [economic reforms](#), will publish results of a nationwide TB survey by the end of the year, a [health ministry](#) official said, adding currently there is enough medicine

for just 500 patients with the drug-resistant strain.

They have been identified in just 38 townships across the vast country and there is so far no accurate measure of the disease's spread.

Resistance to TB drugs develops when treatment fails to kill the bacteria that causes it—either because the patient fails to follow their prescribed dosages or the drug does not work.

"The gap is enormous," said Thandar Lwin who manages the country's TB programme for the Ministry of Health.

"We need laboratory facilities, human resources and funding," she said, adding treatment is made more complex because up to 10 percent of people with the illness also suffer from HIV.

TB was declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organisation (WHO) 20 years ago, but remains a leading cause of death by an infectious disease.

On its website, the UN agency says at least \$1.6 billion is needed annually to prevent the spread of the disease.

Estimates for 2011 put the prevalence of TB in Myanmar at 506 sufferers per 100,000 of the population, compared to a regional average of 271 and a global figure of 170.

Over 95 percent of TB deaths occur in low and middle-income countries.

Global health experts warned in March of the looming risk of an entirely untreatable strain of TB emerging.

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