

Virus could set back tuberculosis fight by several years

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Residents lineup to be tested for COVID-19 as well as HIV and Tuberculosis in downtown Johannesburg Thursday, April 30, 2020. Thousands are being tested in an effort to derail the spread of coronavirus. South Africa will began a phased easing of its strict lockdown measures on May 1, although its confirmed cases of coronavirus continue to increase. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

The fight against tuberculosis could be set back by more than five years due to the coronavirus pandemic, risking an additional 1.4 million TB deaths and 6.3 million infections by 2025, a new report says.

The Stop TB Partnership is a Geneva-based international body leading the global fight against the respiratory illness that infects more than 10 million people annually.

Data from three countries with high TB prevalence, Kenya, India and Ukraine, was used for the new report. Kenya is among the countries with the highest TB burden in the world with an estimated 558 people in every 100,000 infected.

The study says coronavirus lockdowns affecting poor people who cannot practice social distancing in their homes mean higher risk of TB transmission while restricted movements disrupt treatment. The repurposing of TB hospitals and services for coronavirus testing and treatment also is taking a toll.

In extreme cases where lockdowns last up to three months, the study estimates that it might take up to 10 months for restore TB services to [normal levels](#).

Addressing the disease will take far longer.

"In fact, it takes several years for the elevated TB burden to come back to pre-lockdown levels. The more severe the lockdown, the more severe the long-term impact," Nimalan Arinaminpathy, an associate professor in mathematical epidemiology at Imperial College London, told reporters.

Other unintended effects of the COVID-19 outbreak include the stigma that TB patients might face, said Cheri Vincent, chief of the TB division

at USAID.

"Here you have people who have similar symptoms to those of the coronavirus, and some would be even afraid of approaching [health facilities](#) because they would face the stigma of being identified as having COVID-19," she said.

She also expressed concern that COVID-19 could have a devastating effect on TB patients as both diseases attack the respiratory system.

Researchers behind the study also lamented the sudden capacity given to research and development for a COVID-19 [vaccine](#) compared to that for TB over the years.

"We are looking with amazement at how COVID-19 has been around some 128 days but already has about 100 candidate vaccines," said Stop TB executive director Lucica Ditiu. "The new agenda is vaccines and treatment for COVID-19. Nobody is talking about vaccines for HIV, malaria or TB."

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