

Fight against TB back on track after COVID disruptions: WHO

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Deaths from tuberculosis dipped last year amid a dramatic increase in diagnosis and treatment of the world's second deadliest disease, the World Health Organization said Tuesday.

The UN health agency hailed a "significant worldwide recovery" in efforts to rein in tuberculosis, marking "an encouraging trend starting to reverse the detrimental effects of COVID-19 disruptions on TB services".

In a fresh report, WHO found that 7.5 million people received a new TB diagnosis in 2022—the highest figure since the agency began to monitor TB globally in 1995.

That is good news, after diagnosis and treatment of TB plummeted in the first years of the pandemic allowing the disease to rebound following years of decline.

COVID-linked disruptions are estimated to have resulted in nearly half a million excess TB deaths between 2020 and 2022.

But the WHO hailed that the new figures showed that "this has started to reverse or moderate the damaging impact of the pandemic on the number of people dying from or falling ill with TB".

'Final chapter'?

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus voiced hope that the shift could signal the world again is committed to eradicating tuberculosis, once called consumption.

"For millennia, our ancestors suffered and died with tuberculosis, without knowing what it was," he said in a statement.

"Today, we have knowledge and tools they could only have dreamed of... We have an opportunity that no generation in the history of humanity has had: the opportunity to write the final chapter in the story of TB."

Global efforts to combat TB have saved around 75 million lives since year 2000, according to the WHO, but it stressed more was needed.

The disease, which is caused by a bacteria that most often affects the lungs, last year remained the world's second leading cause of death from a single infectious agent, after COVID-19.

In 2022, TB caused an estimated 1.3 million deaths, down from an estimated 1.4 million in both 2020 and 2021, and almost back to the level seen in 2019, WHO said.

But while deaths are trending downward, the number of new TB infections is still rising.

'Reason to hope'

Worldwide, an estimated 10.6 million people developed TB last year, up from an estimated 10.3 million in 2021 and 10.0 million in 2020, the WHO report showed.

It forecast that new infections might begin shrinking again this year or next.

The global gap between the estimated number of people developing TB and the reported number of people newly diagnosed with the disease narrowed in 2022 to an estimated 3.1 million cases, down from around four million in both the previous two years.

The progress is uneven, with two thirds of the global total TB burden found in just eight countries: India, Indonesia, China, the Philippines, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Global Fund, a partnership set up in 2002 to battle AIDS,

tuberculosis and malaria, hailed the report findings.

"Today, we have reason to hope," Global Fund chief Peter Sands said in a separate statement.

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