

The return of tuberculosis

After a century in decline, tuberculosis is making a worrying comeback. New statistics show that TB – a disease which hasn't been seen as a serious threat in the UK for over 100 years – is on the rise.

'We have the highest rate of tuberculosis of all the major Western European countries,' says Paul Sommerfeld, chair of TB Alert, a London based charity aimed at heightening awareness of the condition. 'We haven't yet reached a crisis point, but we need urgent measures to contain the spread of the disease. Although most people in the UK recover from TB, it's potentially fatal.'

Tuberculosis is a bacterial infection mostly found in the lungs, but it can affect any part of the body, such as the brain, lymph glands and bones. Only TB of the lungs or throat may be infectious. Like the common cold, TB is spread through the air after infected people cough or sneeze.

For centuries tuberculosis was a major cause of death in the UK and 'consumption' – as it

TB is on the increase and some areas of London have the worst level of the disease in the West. Here's what you should know about this chronic infection

was known – was greatly feared throughout the country. But the 20th century saw a steady decline in deaths from the disease in industrialised countries and about 50 years ago new drugs became available to treat it.

Yet the disease still spread in the developing world and the decline in the UK began to level out in the 1980s. Since then, the incidence of the disease has started to increase again and cases have risen by 50 per cent.

London is the worst hit city, but outbreaks have been reported in areas such as Greater Manchester, Birmingham and Leicester. The new statistics from a six-month long investigation by members of the London Assembly show that in some of the poorer areas of London the rate of infection has increased four-fold in the last

10 years. The worst-hit areas of the capital now have more cases per 100,000 people than Brazil – traditionally a TB blackspot because of poverty and poor sanitation. But the latest figures show that the disease is also infiltrating the wealthiest areas of the capital.

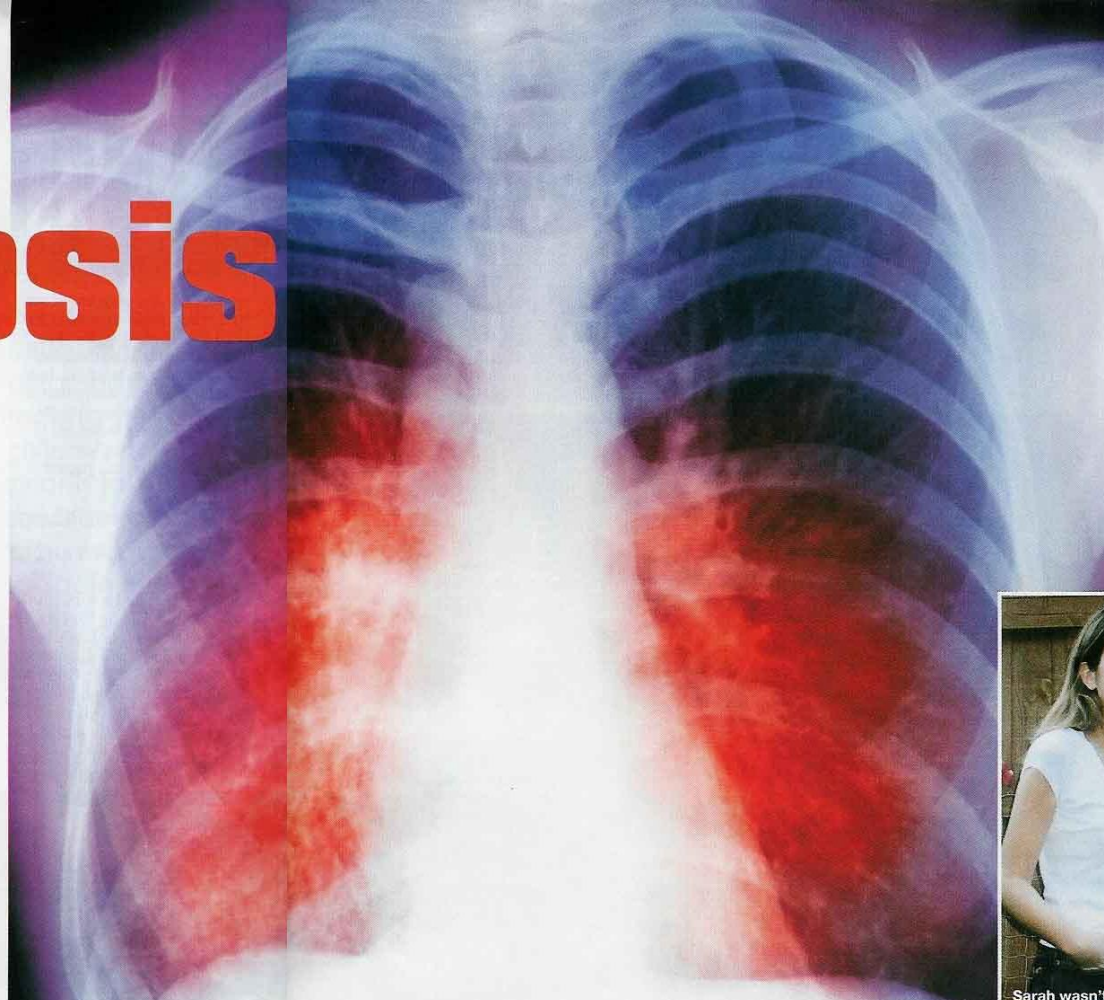
While experts admit that living in cramped housing and eating a poor diet (which weakens the immune system) heightens the risk of infection, they're keen to lift the stigma long associated with the illness.

'TB has been regarded as the disease of poverty, but these figures show that being rich doesn't protect you,' says Paul Sommerfeld. 'It's an airborne disease and you can't stop it striking in any area.' Ex sufferers include Labour MP Ian McCartney, Tina Turner and Ringo Starr.

'We really fight the idea that it's just those living in poverty or from abroad who can develop TB,' says Melanie Matthews of TB Alert. 'If you can breathe, you can catch TB. Thinking in stereotypes can mean people struggle to get diagnosed and pass on the TB to more people.'

Paul agrees and points out that in this age of increased travel and migration, no country is isolated from the rest of the world. 'It's a worldwide problem,' he says. 'The rise in cases in the UK is a pale reflection of the global situation.'

TB is the single biggest killer of young women. World Health Organisation figures show that over 900 million women worldwide – mainly between the ages of 15 and 44 – are infected



The symptoms of TB

- A cough, producing phlegm and even blood
- Loss of weight
- Feeling generally unwell
- Sweats at night
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- TB in other parts of the body can cause pain and swelling

with the disease. In one year alone, more than one million

women will die and over twice that number will be infected.

'If caught early enough, almost all cases of tuberculosis can be cured,' says Paul. 'But worldwide, when you look at both male and female sufferers, a total of two million people are dying from a disease we can cure.'

There's an important difference between being infected with TB and having the disease. Many people infected with the bacteria don't develop the illness because their body's defences protect

Tuberculosis – a bacterial infection found mostly in the lungs – is on the rise in the UK

them – they can't pass it on either. But TB can lie dormant in the body for many years and strike when the immune system is weak. In developing countries, where there's a huge problem with HIV – an infection that seriously weakens the immune system – one third of deaths of those who are HIV-positive are tuberculosis-related.

A worrying trend is the increase in the number of multi drug-resistant strains of TB, which are difficult to treat with conventional medicine. 'At the moment there's a relatively low level of multi drug-resistant strains in this country. We need to make sure we keep it that way,' says Paul.

'These strains can be treated but, with just one case costing up to £100,000 in healthcare, it's extremely expensive. So if levels of multi drug-resistant strains got out of hand, it'd be an enormous burden on resources. To ensure this doesn't happen, we need to detect cases early and treat them with four drugs – the standard way to kill off all the bacteria.'

Once under treatment, sufferers are no longer infectious. In this country, a vaccine against TB called the BCG is routinely offered to all secondary school children between the ages of 10 and 14. And it's now increasingly being offered to babies born in cities that might be at risk.

'We'll be keeping a close eye on

developments and are anxious that we don't see a continued rise in tuberculosis rates,' says Paul. 'With the right awareness and investment in resources on a worldwide scale, we should be able to control it.' ■

Further information:

- Anyone who thinks they have TB should consult their GP. For general information on the condition, call TB Alert on 0845 4560995 or visit www.tbalert.org.
- Call 020-7688 5555 or visit www.lunguk.org to download a TB leaflet from the British Lung Foundation.

Case study:

Sarah Hamilton, 30, from Wiltshire never thought she could catch TB...

'I was diagnosed with tuberculosis in April 2003. I first noticed the symptoms in early October 2002, but of course at the time I had no idea what I was suffering from.'

'I had a pain in my back, which in hindsight I realise could have been caused by the infection in my lungs. By that November I had flu-like symptoms with a really bad cough that went on for a month. I went to the doctor's and they thought I'd caught one of the bugs going around at the time. But the cough continued and I felt a pain in my chest if I climbed the stairs. I felt breathless and lethargic. I also experienced night sweats, weight loss and loss of appetite, which are classic symptoms of TB. I'd been to the doctor a few times by this point and had been prescribed antibiotics but, of course, they were no good. In February I started to feel a bit better, but then I suddenly took a turn for the worse again. So on another visit to the doctor I insisted on an X-ray. This finally picked up the TB.'

'I went on the drug programme, which I've now finished. I feel better than ever, largely because I'm much healthier and eating really well. I've no idea where I caught TB. I lived with my parents in a small town outside Bath. I was born in the UK and I've lived here all my life. I was working in London around that time, but there's no way of knowing where I caught it. I just didn't think it could happen to me. I remember watching a documentary about how it was increasing in the UK again. Even when a couple of people mentioned that I could have it, I said: "Of course I haven't got that!" I think I assumed I'd feel much more ill and be coughing up loads of blood. I want to stress that, although the chances of getting TB in this country are still not high, it's a possibility to bear in mind – especially as it's not the first thing some doctors think of.'



Sarah wasn't a typical TB sufferer and waited six months for diagnosis

The celebs who have suffered from TB



Tina Turner and Ringo Starr are two high profile figures who have suffered from TB, but there's still a stigma attached to the illness