



**HEALTH**  
KwaZulu-Natal

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## **DRUG RESISTANT TUBERCULOSIS IN KWAZULU-NATAL**

Tuberculosis is a disease caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. A person gets infected by inhaling the bacteria that get into the air during coughing of a patient with the disease. The bacteria remain in the air after coughing only for a short while. A person with AIDS has a much higher chance to get this infection as compared to healthy individuals. KwaZulu-Natal has the largest AIDS problem in South Africa. Therefore, it also the largest number of patients with tuberculosis.

There are 11 drugs available for the treatment of tuberculosis. Patients with the disease are treated with a combination of 4 of these for a period of 6 months. These 4 drugs are called "first line treatment drugs". If the bacterium develops resistance to the 2 best drugs, treatment becomes more difficult. This is then called multi-drug resistant tuberculosis or MDR-TB. There are 2 other drugs that are good replacements for the 2 best drugs. However, if the bacterium becomes resistant to these 2 drugs as well, the treatment becomes extremely difficult. We call this extreme drug resistant tuberculosis or XDR-TB. The remaining 7 drugs are less potent and the bacteria can become resistant to these as well.

At this moment there is a tuberculosis bacterium around in KwaZulu Natal that is resistant to 7 of the 9 drugs that have been tested, including the 4 best drugs. The other 2 drugs are currently not available in South Africa and have therefore not been tested yet. Because one needs a minimum of 3 drugs to treat tuberculosis, this form of tuberculosis has become almost untreatable.

The UKZN and the Department of Health has taken steps to limit the spread of this XDR-TB. This includes investigations to establish how far the disease has spread in the province, rapid diagnosis and separation of the patients from others as well as improved tracing of contacts to be able to find patients in an early stage of the disease before they start spreading it to other people. At national level, the process to get the remaining 2 drugs into the country has also commenced. Test are underway to establish whether these 2 drugs can be used on these patients or whether there is already resistance to these as well.

**ENDS**

**For more information please contact Nhlanhla Nkosi on 083 459 1922**

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uMnyango Wezempilo . Departement van Gesondheid

*Fighting Disease, Fighting Poverty, Giving Hope*