



### 'TB MADE ME STRONGER'

I never imagined I would get something like TB. I'd heard about it, but it was always at a distance. I'm quite an active person and around July 2005, just after I finished engineering college, I received the unwelcome news that I had TB. I'd been having night sweats, my body temperature would oscillate wildly and I'd feel extreme exhaustion.

I was given this fact: TB is just about everywhere, lying dormant. It's your good health and immune system that keeps it in check. If you tire out your body, as I did mine, it gets too weak and TB breaks out. Once this happens, there's no need to be frightened. There are treatments available to get your health back on track. It depends on how your condition is. Have your closest friends and family with you. They will help you through this hard time.

It took six months for me to get better, but I had to be on medication for nine just to be sure. I kept busy. I formed a band, learnt to dance and did the best I could at work. Now, as of June 2009, I have come third in a National Endurance race (called Enduro 3, held in Pune). I've been on long treks, I cycle to work, 15 km away, every Friday too.

Those nine months changed me a bit. Emotionally and mentally, I came out a stronger person.

— Software engineer Donald Ksing, 27

**L**ET'S FIRST bust a huge TB myth: that it only affects household help and autorickshaw drivers. "It's a myth that TB is more prevalent in the lower strata of society TB does not spare anyone," says Dr S K Jain, senior consultant, pulmonology, Moolchand Medicity. TB has been known to strike everyone – young students (see box), IAS officers, middle class housewives and maids. Doctors call it the 'national disease of India' because it kills two people every three minutes.

#### ALL ABOUT TB

TB is a highly infectious disease caused by a bacterium, Mycobacterium Tuberculosis. It is curable if treated and if you complete the course of drugs. However, if left untreated, it can kill.

About 70-80 per cent of people in India – people like you and me – are infected by TB but do not suffer from it. The TB bacillus simply lies dormant in us.

"By the age of 20, a majority of Indians, about 70-80 per cent, are exposed to TB bacilli. It is not a big deal. It lies dormant in us and most of us never develop the disease," says Dr R K Mani, director of pulmonology, Artemis Health Institute, Gurgaon.

The disease is 'activated' in those infected with TB when their immunity is compromised either because of stress, bad health, treatments like chemotherapy or if they are HIV+, says Dr Himanshu Garg, consultant, respiratory medicine, Max Healthcare. Though TB mostly affects the lungs, it also affects the brain, bones, liver, skin. These may take longer to treat.

#### NO FEAR

Symptoms for all kinds of TB are more or less the same. They are: loss of appetite, night sweats, unexplained loss of weight, chronic cough with blood-tinged sputum and low-grade fever. The treatment for all forms of TB is standard. The patient must take an uninterrupted course of drugs for a minimum of six months.

Says Dr Jain, "TB must be diagnosed properly to be treated effectively as irregular treatment or lack of treatment leads to the bacillus developing resistance to TB medicines."

Treatment is accessible to everyone. "The government runs an incredible programme called DOTS that has 100 per cent coverage. So everyone has access to TB drugs," says Dr Garg.

#### DANGER ZONE

Despite this, there are many TB deaths in India because of lack of awareness and non-compliance.

Doctors say many patients who start treatment stop it as soon as they feel better. This is the worst thing to do. Stopping treatment mid-course results in the TB bacillus developing a resistance to TB drugs. This form of TB is called Multi-Drug Resistant TB (MDR-TB). That's a very severe form of the disease and cannot be cured by the usual medicines. The medicines to treat MDR-TB are also much more expensive and much more toxic than the regular doses. "If you undergo irregular and incomplete treatment, you develop MDR-TB that is incurable. At the most it can be contained," stresses Dr Mani.

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