

HEALTH REPORT - New Tuberculosis Drug (Broadcast: January 5, 2005)

I'm Gwen Outen with the VOA Special English Health Report.

Research scientists say they have discovered a new drug that will help the fight against the disease tuberculosis. The substance is called R-two-zero-seven-nine-one-zero. Experts say it has been shown in animal experiments to clear tuberculosis infections two times faster than other medicines. Scientists have just begun to test the experimental drug in people.

The researchers described the drug in Science magazine.

Tuberculosis infects at least eight million people each year. It also is the second leading cause of death around the world. The disease kills two million to three million people each year. Only Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome kills more. Eleven million people are infected with both tuberculosis and the virus that causes AIDS.

Tuberculosis spreads easily through the air, by coughing, sneezing or even talking. But people infected with the tuberculosis mycobacterium will not necessarily become sick. The organism can live in the body for years before becoming active.

Koen Andries led the effort to develop the new anti-tuberculosis drug. Doctor Andries is a researcher with the drug maker Johnson and Johnson in Belgium. He said the new drug is the first such medicine to be tested in people since rifampin was developed in nineteen-sixty-three.

Today, rifampin is used in combination with two other medicines to treat tuberculosis. The drugs must be taken for up to nine months. But experts say the drug treatment is no longer effective against the disease in many parts of the world. They say this is because the mycobacterium has developed defenses against the treatment. Doctors say the resistance resulted from patients failing to follow directions for the medicines.

The experimental drug is one of a new group of chemicals called diarylquinolines. Doctors say it works differently than other anti-tuberculosis drugs. Older drugs work by interfering with the manufacture of different systems in the mycobacterium.

Doctor Andries says the new drug blocks the energy supply of the organism. He also says the drug appears to be most effective when given in combination with the older drugs.

Limited human tests of the new drug have shown that it is safe. But some researchers warn that it may not work as well in people as it has in mice.

This VOA Special English Health Report was written by Cynthia Kirk. This is Gwen Outen.