WWW.IJRPR.COM

International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Tuberculosis: A Comprehensive Review of Pathogenesis, Diagnosis, Treatment, and Public Health Challenges

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Abstract:

Tuberculosis (TB), caused by Mycobacterium tuberculosis (Mtb), remains one of the most formidable infectious diseases globally. With nearly 10.6 million new cases and 1.3 million deaths reported in 2022, TB continues to present significant public health concerns. This review explores the current understanding of TB pathogenesis, evaluates diagnostic techniques and treatment protocols, and examines key public health issues that impede TB control. It also highlights the impacts of co-infections, socio-economic factors, and the COVID-19 pandemic on TB prevalence and management. Ongoing efforts in vaccine development and novel therapies are discussed, emphasizing the need for global cooperation and innovation.

Keywords: Tuberculosis, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, drug resistance, diagnosis, treatment, global health, public health, latent TB, MDR-TB

1. Introduction

Tuberculosis is an ancient disease with modern-day implications. Discovered by Robert Koch in 1882, Mycobacterium tuberculosis is an aerobic, acid-fast bacillus that primarily affects the lungs but can infect virtually any organ. Despite advances in healthcare and microbiology, TB remains among the top ten causes of death worldwide, primarily affecting low- and middle-income countries [1,2]. Its persistence is largely attributed to delayed diagnosis, drug resistance, and socio-economic disparities.

2. Pathogenesis

2.1 Transmission

TB spreads through airborne droplets. Inhaled bacilli reach alveolar spaces and are phagocytosed by alveolar macrophages. However, Mtb possesses virulence factors that allow it to evade destruction, survive, and replicate intracellularly [3].

2.2 Immune Response and Granuloma Formation

The adaptive immune response leads to the formation of granulomas, consisting of macrophages, lymphocytes, and other immune cells. While granulomas restrict bacterial spread, they also provide a niche for Mtb latency [4].

2.3 Latent and Active Disease

About 90% of infected individuals develop latent TB (LTBI), with no clinical symptoms. Reactivation can occur, particularly in immunocompromised hosts, leading to active TB disease [5].

3. Diagnosis

3.1 Conventional Tests

Tuberculin Skin Test (TST): Widely used but limited by BCG cross-reactivity [6].

Microscopy: Acid-fast bacilli staining is fast but insensitive [7].

Culture: The gold standard for TB diagnosis, though slow (2–6 weeks) [8].

3.2 Modern Diagnostics

Interferon-Gamma Release Assays (IGRAs): More specific for Mtb; useful in BCG-vaccinated individuals [9].

Molecular Testing (e.g., Xpert MTB/RIF): Offers rapid, sensitive detection of Mtb and rifampicin resistance [10].

Radiography: CT scans and chest X-rays support diagnosis but lack specificity [11].

4. Treatment

4.1 Drug-Susceptible TB

Standard treatment consists of:

Intensive Phase (2 months): Isoniazid, rifampicin, pyrazinamide, ethambutol.

Continuation Phase (4 months): Isoniazid and rifampicin [12].

4.2 Drug-Resistant TB

MDR-TB: Requires second-line agents and longer treatment durations [13].

XDR-TB: Even more difficult to treat, with limited options [14].

4.3 New Drugs and Regimens

Drugs like bedaquiline, pretomanid, and delamanid are used in newer, shorter MDR-TB regimens with improved outcomes [15].

5. Public Health Considerations

5.1 TB-HIV Co-Infection

HIV-infected individuals are at high risk of TB reactivation. Integrated TB-HIV care improves outcomes [16].

5.2 Socioeconomic Determinants

Malnutrition, poverty, overcrowding, and healthcare inaccessibility significantly contribute to TB incidence and poor treatment adherence [17].

5.3 COVID-19 Pandemic Impact

COVID-19 disrupted TB detection and treatment programs globally, reversing years of progress [18].

6. Vaccination and Research

The BCG vaccine offers protection against severe childhood TB but has limited efficacy in adults. Several new vaccines (e.g., M72/AS01E) are undergoing trials [19]. Investment in vaccine research is essential for long-term control.

7. Conclusion

TB remains a major health challenge due to its complex pathogenesis, diagnostic difficulties, and treatment barriers. Addressing TB requires a multidisciplinary, global approach that includes strengthening healthcare systems, developing effective vaccines, and promoting socioeconomic development. Achieving TB eradication is possible, but only with sustained political will and global collaboration.

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