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WHO recommends new diagnostic tools to help end TB

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Ending TB will require sustained investment in research and innovation



The World Health Organization (WHO) is urging countries to accelerate action to end tuberculosis (TB) and expand access to lifesaving services by using new innovations such as diagnostic tests that can be used near the point-of-care and tongue swabs that can help detect the disease faster reaching more people.

The new guidelines on tests for TB that can be used near the point-of-care, issued by WHO, mark another step towards faster detection and treatment of one of the world's deadliest infectious diseases. These portable, simple-to-use tests bring TB diagnosis closer to where people routinely seek care.

Available at less than half the cost of many existing molecular diagnostics, they can help countries expand access to testing. The tests can operate on battery power and deliver results in less than one hour, allowing patients to start treatment sooner.

The guidelines also recommend easy-to-collect tongue swab samples, as well as a cost-saving sputum pooling strategy to increase testing efficiency for TB and rifampicin-resistant TB. Tongue swabs allow adults and adolescents who cannot produce sputum to receive TB testing for the first time, enabling disease detection among people who are at an increased risk of dying from TB. Sputum pooling, where samples from several individuals are combined and tested together, can significantly reduce commodity costs and machine time, leading to faster results for people and TB programmes – an approach specifically recommended when resources are exceptionally constrained.

While new diagnostic tools represent a critical step forward, ending TB will require sustained investment in research and innovation. Global funding for TB research remains far below the estimated annual need of around $5 billion, leaving major gaps in the development of new diagnostics, medicines and vaccines needed to end the epidemic.