Nontuberculous mycobacteria (NTM) lung disease

Summary

- NTM lung disease is a serious disease caused by bacteria commonly found in soil and water. It can cause damage to the lungs and make people very ill.
- NTM lung disease mainly affects women over 50 years old, of European and Asian descent.
- It is more commonly found in warmer climates.

What is NTM lung disease?

NTM lung disease is a serious disease caused by bacteria commonly found in dust, soil and water. It can cause damage to the lungs and make people very ill.

NTM lung disease mainly affects women over 50 years old, of European and Asian descent.

It is more commonly found in warmer climates.

Signs and symptoms of NTM lung disease

Signs and symptoms of NTM lung disease include:

- coughing
- weight loss
- loss of appetite
- night sweats and fever
- lack of energy
- breathing problems
- chest pain.

Diagnosis of NTM lung disease

NTM lung disease is often diagnosed incorrectly, or not diagnosed at all. It is diagnosed using a CT scan and an acid-fast bacilli smear test of your sputum (the thick liquid that comes from your respiratory tract when you cough).

Regular chest x-rays do not provide enough information to make an accurate diagnosis.

Treatment of NTM lung disease

Not all patients with NTM lung disease require immediate treatment, but they should be assessed by a specialist familiar with the condition (one who has managed patients with this disease before).

Antibiotics are used to treat NTM lung disease. Successful treatment can take 18 to 24 months. Some people will make a full recovery, while others need ongoing monitoring for the rest of their life.

It may be important to identify how and where NTM exposure happened (for example, a contaminated spa bath) to reduce the risk of further infections.

Prevention of NTM lung disease

The best way to prevent NTM lung disease is to make sure all your taps and water appliances (showers, baths, spa baths) are installed and working correctly, and your hot water system is operating at the recommended temperature (>60 ºC).

If you are gardening – particularly if you are working with soil or potting mix – wear a dust mask to avoid breathing...
in particulate matter which could contain NTM.

Living with NTM lung disease

An important part of living with NTM lung disease is managing your symptoms. Try to get enough rest, eat healthy food and look out for side effects of treatment as guided by your doctor.

Physiotherapy to clear the airways by removing any sputum from the lungs is very important. A specialist physiotherapist familiar with the latest lung clearance exercises is essential.

Managing an illness like NTM lung disease can be challenging both physically and emotionally. You may want to consider seeking support through a mental health professional or through joining a support group of other people going through a similar situation.

You may want to join an online support group or join or create a support group in your local area.

Where to get help

• Your doctor
• NTM Australia
• Lung Foundation Australia Tel. 1800 654 301
• Palliative Care Victoria Tel. (03) 9662 9644

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Lung Foundation Australia

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