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Unlike the rest of the country, Louisiana is experiencing a decrease in tuberculosis, though cases of TB strains that do not respond to medication are rising here.

The state has reported 12 cases of multi-drug-resistant TB in Louisiana, according to Susan Bach-Stewart, state Department of Health and Hospitals spokeswoman.

Multi-drug-resistant TB in patients infected with HIV has become a problem of increasing concern to public health officials because of the greater difficulty in treating these patients and because of the potential for spread to others, she said.

Two of the 12 people with multi-drug resistant TB in Louisiana are infected with the HIV virus.

For 1989, Louisiana reported 407 cases of TB to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, a rate of 9.3 per 100,000. In 1990, Louisiana reported 366 cases of TB, for a rate of 8.7 per 100,000.

"We have not seen an increase in the number of cases, but that has been happening nationally, and basically in areas where you have a high rate of HIV infection," Bach-Stewart said.

"We can expect that as our rate of HIV infection goes up, we will probably see an increase here as well."

The number of reported cases of TB has been increasing since 1985 in the United States, and for 1990, the CDC expects 18,600 to 19,400 cases, an increase of 15 percent.

The largest increase is among the 25- to 44-year age group, which the CDC attributes to the AIDS epidemic.

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rising number of TB cases among people with acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS.

The regional office for the 11-parish area including Baton Rouge is aware of what seems to be an increase here, said Meredit Wilson, regional tuberculosis program manager.

"We are having more and more reports of possible TB. Some end up not being TB, but we do have what seems to be an increase," she said. "I do know I have had a number of reports since the first of the year compared to this time last year."

People with TB come from "across the board," Wilson said. "They come from all economic groups. The predominant problem of TB is among the homeless and alcoholics, and we do see a fair number of low-income people in the clinic, but we also see people at any economic level."

The disease also strikes at all ages, she said. "We currently have an 18-month-old with TB. We haven't identified where that came from."

Once a person has tested positive for TB but has no active symptoms of the disease, they are required to take medication, usually lasting about six months, Wilson said.

If the disease symptoms are active, the treatment can last up to a year, she said.

Symptoms of the disease include persistent cough, fever, night sweats and sudden weight loss - a loss of 20 to 40 pounds in two to six weeks, Wilson said.

TB can be cured, she said. But a cure requires patients to take medicine as prescribed.

Some of the cases of multi-drug-resistant TB in the state are attributable to people who have failed to take their medication, who have started and stopped and started again, or who take it in a haphazard manner.

"It becomes resistant from not taking medication," Wilson said.

If a person with TB refuses to take his medicine, he may be arrested for endangering the public, she said.

"We have a number of people who are on quarantine. Most of them have a specific regimen called directly observed therapy, so they bring their medicine and watch them take the medicine, and both sign for it," Wilson said.

The state investigates each reported case of TB. Sometimes the source is not found, she said.

"The ones that are infectious are the ones we are most concerned about. They spread the disease before they even know they have it."

Tuberculosis is contagious only when it infects the lungs, she said.

The person sick with TB coughs up the organism and somebody close by breathes in. Generally, people get it from close contact with people who are infected, from living with them or working with them in close proximity.

"Somebody who's highly contagious can cough up enough of the organisms to infect an individual in a large public place, store. And that person never knows where they got it," Wilson said.

Tuberculosis is diagnosed using a skin test. Wilson said those who have a positive skin test or who have a history of TB also send sputum samples off for analysis and take a chest X-ray of the person suspected of having TB.

Wilson said that she tested positive for TB two years ago and underwent six months of medication to be cured of the disease. She never developed symptoms of the active disease, she said.

State law requires health-care workers to be tested annually for TB, and who have had close personal contact with a person who comes in contact with TB patients contract the disease, "we have never had a health care worker who developed an active disease," Wilson said.

People infected with the drug-resistant strains of the disease "require other than traditional medication," she said. "It requires longer treatment, and for some people, they die, especially if they don't get medication."

Louisiana provides free TB medication to all people in the state, regardless of income, she said.

The standard treatment costs more than $100 per month, per person. Currently there are 60 or more people in the 11-parish Baton Rouge region taking multiple-drug treatments for active TB, Wilson said.