

TB is back

Watsonville hardest hit area, health officials say

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Health
The number of young children in Santa Cruz County infected with tuberculosis is on the rise, and Watsonville is the area hardest hit, according to county health officials.

Fifty-eight children five years and under were newly infected with TB in 1994, up from 54 in 1993 and 18 in 1992, the Santa Cruz County Health Agency reported. Salud Para la Gente in Watsonville reported that 31 children tested positive for infection in 1994, compared to 14 in 1993, and six in 1992.

Cindie Stoops, TB program manager for the county's Health Services Agency, cautioned that the increased numbers could just reflect more wide-spread testing.

But, she said, "If you have more infected kids, it's an indication of what (the infection rate) is going to be in the future."

TB infected children do not pose a public health hazard because children under 10 years old are not generally considered communicable. But the rise could be an indication that more adults are actively spreading the disease.

Only five to 10 percent of people infected with the TB bacteria develop active, communicable symptoms at some time in their lives. The majority of people with the infection won't get the active form of TB, which may be triggered by stress and other poor health con-

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The good news is that both TB infection and active TB are very treatable. Only four cases in the past two years have proven at all drug resistant in Santa Cruz County. All have been successfully controlled with medication.

Once a fairly common threat that sent sufferers to sanitariums, TB was on the decline in the U.S. until the mid-1980s.

"TB has been increasing nationwide since 1985," said Stoops. In Santa Cruz County, she said, health care providers have begun to see some increases over the last few years.

"It's a trend we think is going to continue," she said. "We have seven active TB cases reported so far in 1995."

Stoops said TB is back for a handful of reasons. One is an increase in immigration from areas of the world where TB is more common, including Mexico, Southeast Asia, and Africa, she said.

The drop in the living standards of the poor in the last few years is also to blame. "TB has always been linked to standards of living and housing situations, and a lot more people are homeless," Stoops said.

Housing is especially tight in Watsonville, where more families tend to share cramped housing in order to pay the rent.

"The majority of the TB in our county is in Watsonville," said Syd-

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nei Wilby, the senior public health program manager for Santa Cruz county.

"It's a disease we thought we had under control. We've had outbreaks before, but not this steady increase," Wilby said.

Stoops emphasized that TB is not generally transmitted casually. "It requires close contact over a long period of time."

She noted that, on average, only 30 percent of the people who share a living space with someone infected by TB contract the dis-

ease. TB is transmitted through airborne germs usually launched by coughing or sneezing.

The number of people infected with TB who developed active cases reported to the county is also up. The number of cases more than doubled between 1992 and 1994, from 13 to 31. In 1993, 25 cases were reported.

But the numbers could be misleading because not all health providers report TB cases to the county.

Salud Para la Gente's figures also show that the percentage of people testing positive for TB infection at the clinic has actually fallen from 11.5 percent in 1992 to 6.3 percent in 1994.

The drop in the percentage could be due to the greater number of people tested for TB. In 1992, Salud tested 799 people. In 1994, 2,638 people sought TB skin tests.

Stoops said she is concerned that people don't understand that only the active form of TB, not the infection, is contagious.

"There is a lot of fear out there from people who don't understand the difference," Stoops said.

If untreated, active TB damages the lungs and can be fatal.

Health care providers recommend that people get a TB skin test if they have a persistent cough that brings up sputum accompanied by weight loss, low grade fever, night sweats and other symptoms. Parents should have their children tested at 15 months and also before they begin school.

Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency provides a free TB screening clinic Mondays through Thursdays at 9 Crestview Avenue in Watsonville. The hours are Mondays 8 to 11:30 a.m.; Mondays through Wednesday, 3 to 5 p.m.; and Thursdays 8 to 5 p.m.