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HEALTH DEPARTMENT OBSERVES WORLD TUBERCULOSIS DAY

In recognition of the fact that tuberculosis (TB) is still an epidemic out of control in much of the world, the Westchester County Department of Health will today join with the global community in observing World Tuberculosis Day.

“Worldwide, tuberculosis remains a leading cause of death from infectious disease,” stated Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. “An estimated two billion people, which accounts for one-third of the world’s population, are infected with the bacteria that cause TB. Each year, approximately eight million people become ill from TB and, of these, two million die as a result.”

“Although Westchester County, like most of the United States, has low rates of tuberculosis, we should not relax our efforts to control the spread of this serious illness,” continued Dr. Lipsman. “The reality of today’s global economy is that through the increasing movement of people around the world, tuberculosis travels everywhere, making no place safe from the risk of TB infection. Tuberculosis does not discriminate – it can infect people we come in contact with throughout the community on a daily basis - school teachers, childcare providers, housekeepers, retail store staff and health care workers,” he noted. “It’s also important to note that while tuberculosis is curable, hard-to-treat strains have developed that are resistant to one or more of the drugs traditionally used to treat the disease.”

To raise public awareness about the devastating effects of the disease, the Health Department has created a special World TB Day section on its website, www.westchestergov.com/health, where information about tuberculosis and links to TB related resources can be found.

WORLD TB DAY P.2

Since 1992, the incidence rates of new TB cases in Westchester have decreased. From 1998 until the present, the number of new TB cases each year has been the lowest experienced in Westchester since the early 1980's, but has not decreased further. Tuberculosis incidence in Westchester County averages 6-7 cases per 100,000 residents since 2003 and is higher than the national average. Only five states (including New York State and Washington D.C.) had higher incidence rates of tuberculosis in 2003 than Westchester County.

The treatment of tuberculosis is lengthy and complex. Most cases require that patients be treated with up to four drugs for a period of six to nine months. A major challenge to combating the disease is ensuring that those who are infected complete their full course of treatment.

Through the Health Department's TB Control Program, directly observed therapy (where a health care worker watches the patient take each dose of medicine) is provided to all active tuberculosis cases to make certain that each patient completes his or her course of therapy. The Program also places high priority on early identification and treatment of cases, as well as aggressive contact tracing. In addition, through its TB chest clinics, the Health Department provides direct medical care and medications to individuals with tuberculosis infection and disease.

Tuberculosis is a disease that is spread from person to person through the air. TB usually infects the lungs, but it can affect other parts of the body also.

General symptoms of TB may include feeling weak or sick, weight loss, fever and/or night sweats. Symptoms of TB of the lungs may include cough, chest pain and/or coughing up blood. A tuberculin skin test is the only way to tell if a person has been infected with tuberculosis before he actually comes down with the illness. If a person's skin test indicates that he or she has been infected with tuberculosis, an individual can be treated to prevent that person from developing an active case of tuberculosis. In most cases, this means that the person takes a single medication for several months to prevent tuberculosis. Ask your doctor whether you should have a skin test for tuberculosis infection.

For more information about tuberculosis, or the tuberculin skin test, call the Westchester County Department of Health at (914) 813-5000 or visit www.westchestergov.com/health.