Black fungus: Is diabetes behind India's high number of cases?

About 12,000 cases of a condition known as "black fungus" have been reported in India, mostly in patients recovering from Covid-19.

This severe infection is normally very rare and has a mortality rate of about 50%.

Some medical experts have suggested India has seen cases growing because of the high prevalence of diabetes.

But are other factors at work and what is happening in other countries?

Which countries have got black fungus?

Prior to the Covid pandemic, at least 38 countries around the world had reported cases of mucormycosis, more commonly known as black fungus.

India and Pakistan had the highest rates with around 140 cases per million annually, according to Leading International Fungal Education.

Dr David Denning at the University of Manchester, an expert on fungal infections, says reported cases of black fungus in India were "masses more than any other part of the world" well before the pandemic.

"Mucormycosis is strongly linked with poorly controlled diabetes and there's a lot of it [diabetes] in India."

What is diabetes and how can you reduce risks?

In patients recovering from Covid-19, according to a recent research paper looking at cases globally, 94% of those who had the fungal infection also suffered from diabetes.

And the majority (71%) of the reported cases of black fungus were from India.

Is a link to diabetes seen in other countries?

Of the top countries with a high per-capita prevalence of diabetes, others (apart from India) have reported cases of mucormycosis.

India's neighbours, Pakistan and Bangladesh, both have a high prevalence of diabetes in their populations, and have had mucormycosis cases - but not in especially large numbers.

In Bangladesh, doctors have been treating one confirmed case of mucormycosis and are awaiting test results for another suspected case.

Doctors told the BBC that both patients also had diabetes.

Pakistan has also reported five cases of mucormycosis in recent weeks and four had died as of 12 May, according to media reports.

Brazil has reported 29 cases so far, but it's not yet clear how many of these had Covid and/or were diabetic.

Russia has also reported "isolated" cases of mucormycosis in Covid patients recently - but it is unclear how many have been detected so far.

The US has a very high prevalence of diabetes - 9.3% of the population is estimated to have the condition.

It also has the highest number of Covid cases globally.

But mucormycosis is very rare - diabetes cases there are largely managed with only 3% going undiagnosed, according to the US Centers for Disease Control.

Why might diabetes be a risk factor?

Experts say it's not so much recorded cases of diabetes as the levels of undiagnosed diabetes that are the issue.

The IDF estimates that about 57% of those with diabetes in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka are undiagnosed cases - and nearly all of these are found in India.

Pakistan is also estimated to have a high proportion of undiagnosed diabetes.

"There's a lot of uncontrolled

diabetes in India because people don't do regular health check-ups," says Dr Hariprasath Prakash at the International School of Medicine in Kyrgyzstan.

He says a large majority of diabetes cases are "discovered through other health complications" and remain untreated.

Poorly controlled diabetes puts you at higher risk of certain infections, including some fungal ones.

The Africa region also has a high proportion of undiagnosed diabetes at nearly 60%, but estimates show the incidence of mucormycosis there is low - only 3%.

Dr Denning points out that "it could be because [mucormycosis] cases might be going undiagnosed... it is not the easiest thing to diagnose."

Studies have suggested that cases of black fungus go undiagnosed because of the difficulty in tissue sample collection and the lack of sensitivity of the diagnostic tests. What else might cause black fungus?

Experts also suggest that the indiscriminate use of steroids for some Covid treatments could be linked to mucormycosis or other fungal infections.

Two widely prescribed steroids - dexamethasone and methylprednisolone - are used for Covid patients in India to reduce the inflammation caused by the body's immune response.

However, with hospitals and doctors overwhelmed by a growing numbers of cases, there's evidence that these steroids are being taken without medical supervision.

The Indian authorities have recently warned against such self-medication, which can have seriously harmful consequences including, says Dr Denning, such as an increased the risk of developing mucormycosis.

A UK-based trial conducted on around 2,000 Covid patients showed that dexamethasone helped reduce mortality in those with a moderate or severe infection, but could potentially be harmful for those with a mild infection. That study showed the efficacy of steroids when used in a hospital setting. However, some states in India are reported to have distributed dexamethasone to the public along with home isolation kits. BBC

US sends Pakistan health supplies to combat COVID-19

ISLAMABAD - The United States mobilized an airlift of critical health supplies that arrived in Pakistan Saturday to help the country combat the coronavirus outbreak.

The donation includes tens of thousands of "critically needed and requested" personal protective items for healthcare professionals, hundreds of oximeters and other supplies, the U.S. Embassy said.

"Today, the United States continues our proud partnership with the government of Pakistan in our fight against the COVID-19 pandemic," said U.S. Embassy Chargé d'affaires Lesslie Viguerie.

"Pakistan is not alone in its fight against the coronavirus," Viguerie said.

Washington has allocated more than $40 million to Islamabad for COVID-19 response assistance, including a donation of 200 ventilators, to care for those suffering from the disease.

The support, U.S. officials said, has benefited more than 2.5 million Pakistanis across the country, providing life-saving treatment, strengthening case-finding and surveillance, and mobilizing innovative financing to bolster emergency preparedness.

Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokesman Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri said his government "greatly appreciates" the U.S. assistance.

"This timely gesture is part of the continued assistance that the U.S. has provided to Pakistan to support our COVID relief and prevention efforts," Chaudhri said.

Pakistan has reported more than 21,000 deaths among at least 930,000 cases of coronavirus infections since the pandemic hit the country of about 220 million early last year.

Islamabad recently received 1.2 million doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and 100,000 Pfizer doses under the United Nations-backed COVAX program launched to support the purchase and delivery of COVID-19 vaccine to 92 low- and middle-income countries.

The United States has contributed $2 billion to the COVAX initiative, with another $2 billion commitment planned by 2022.

While initially close ally China provided massive COVID-19 medical supplies to Pakistan and donated a large quantity of vaccine, the Pakistani government says it has purchased or is in the process of procuring more than 90% of the vaccine to inoculate 70% of its eligible population by the end of 2021.

Beijing has also trained Pakistani staff and established a facility at Islamabad's National Institute of Health, which is locally filling and finishing the Chinese CanSino vaccine from the concentrate China is providing. The facility has the capacity to roll out 3 million doses a month.

Pakistan has inoculated close to 9 million people as of Saturday, but officials say the pace will pick up in coming weeks to about 600,000 a day to achieve the stated target.

VoA

On reforms in Uzbekistan to enhance the role of the media in the life of the state and society

Over the years of independence, Uzbekistan has implemented comprehensive measures aimed at building a democratic State based on the rule of law, a strong civil society, economic development, the creation of conditions for a peaceful and prosperous life for the people, and the attainment by Uzbekistan of its rightful place in the international arena.

On the basis of the requirements of our time to identify the most important priorities and clear guidelines for further deepening democratic reforms and accelerating the country's development, the Presidential Decree on the Action Strategy for the Further Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which provides for the adoption of the Action Strategy for the Five Priority Development Areas of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021 (hereinafter, the Action Strategy), was adopted.

The Action Strategy is based on the conceptual issues of the country's socio-political, socio-economic, cultural and humanitarian development, as outlined by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

In particular, the document defines 5 priority directions of the country's development:

1. Improvement of state and social construction.

2. Ensuring the rule of law and further reforming the judicial and legal system.

3. Development and liberalization of the economy.

4. Development of the social sphere.

5. Ensuring security, interethnic harmony and religious tolerance, the implementation of a balanced, mutually beneficial and constructive foreign policy.

In the context of the above, it is necessary to emphasize the commitment of the Republic of Uzbekistan to democratize the information sphere, which is entirely aimed at ensuring freedom of speech and access to information. These principles are also contained in the Action Strategy and are reflected in the following key areas:

Establishing an open dialogue with the population and introducing accountability of officials to the public;

Ensuring openness and evaluation of the performance of public authorities;

Improving public oversight and strengthening the role of the media in this process;

Ensuring information security and timely countering information threats.

In Uzbekistan, the legislative framework is being systematized to ensure the stability of the legal regulation of the activities of the media, as well as to ensure freedom of speech and information, reviving the legal framework of activity and protecting the professional rights of journalists.

At the annual Address of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the Oliy Majlis, it was noted that the media, along with objective coverage of large-scale changes taking place in our country, attract the attention of government departments and the public to urgent problems on the ground and encourage leaders at all levels to eliminate these problems. Today the mass media are increasingly becoming the "fourth estate".

The head of state also said that fair criticism of objective journalists and bloggers points out the mistakes and shortcomings of the old-fashioned leaders, forcing them to change their style of work and increase their responsibility.

In addition, the statements of the Head of State "Openness and freedom of speech are the demand of the times, the demand for reforms in Uzbekistan!" form the country's legal policy aimed at supporting freedom of speech and the development of the media.

In order to strengthen the legal framework for ensuring freedom of speech and effective operation of the media, more than 20 regulatory legal acts have been adopted in the country, including the laws "On the openness of the activities of public authorities and administration", "On the media", "On guarantees and freedom of access to information ." On the principles and guarantees of freedom of information "," On the protection of the professional activity of a journalist "," On informatization ", etc.

In general, in a fairly short period, a large-scale work has been done to ensure freedom of speech, access to information and the development of the media.

Thus, as part of the further liberalization of the media and the protection of journalists' rights, amendments and additions were made to the laws "On the mass media" and "On the protection of journalists' professional activities" on 18 April 2018.

In particular, the websites were defined as mass media, mechanisms for the support of the media by the state were created (provision of tax benefits, other mandatory payments and tariffs, preferences, government subsidies, grants and social orders, as well as social support for editorial staff).

In May 2018, the country's first University of Journalism and Mass Communication was established by presidential decree and opened its doors to students the same year. By the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated February 2, 2019 No.5653 "On additional measures for the further development of the information sphere and mass communications", the Agency of Information and Mass Communications under the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Agency) was established on the basis of the Uzbek Agency for Press and Information.

Since the inception of the Agency 's activities, it has effectively ensured the implementation of the constitutional rights of citizens to freedom of speech and information, promotes the strengthening of the role of the media in the socio-political and socio-economic development of the country, pursues an active policy to create equal conditions for them in the media market, and also protects the rights of journalists.

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Bangladesh goes from basket case to rising star

May 25 was a historic day for the small South Asian country of Bangladesh, when its central bank approved a $200 million currency swap facility for the nearby island economy of Sri Lanka.

Last month, Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves had dropped to $4.5 billion, or about what it owes external lenders, following a year in which the country's economy had been ravaged by a sharp economic downturn caused by COVID-19. Meanwhile, Bangladesh, whose economy has weathered the pandemic surprisingly well, held foreign exchange reserves of about $45 billion.

Bangladesh, which had been famously written off as a "basket case" in 1971 by U.S. President Richard Nixon's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger -- shortly after the country's creation following a bloody war of independence with Pakistan -- has more recently shed that label.

In the 2020-21 fiscal year, Bangladesh for the first time ever overtook its giant neighbor India in terms of per capita income at market prices, although Indian chagrin was assuaged to some extent by the fact that it remained ahead in per capita income measured at purchasing power parity. Nevertheless, that Bangladesh has so rapidly closed the income gap with India, without whose intervention the country would never have come into being, represents a significant shift of economic prowess in the region.

Bangladesh's economic rise has been powered by the ready-made garment industry, which according to a March 2021 report from McKinsey & Co., a management consultancy, accounts for fully 84% of the country's exports after recording a compound annual growth rate of 7% for the last decade.

As the report notes, the phenomenal growth of the industry was born out of tragedy, following several well-publicized factory tragedies in 2012 and 2013 that led to the loss of more than a thousand lives. Facing the prospect of losing important customers, and the loss of tariff preferences in the U.S., the sector was forced to restructure and has since moved from strength to strength.

After ready-made garments, remittances from the country's diaspora are Bangladesh's second-largest source of foreign exchange earnings. In the first 10 months of the 2020-21 fiscal year which ends in June, the country raked in more than $20 billion in remittances, according to central bank data, setting a new record. This helps explain the country's large foreign exchange buffer, which permitted it largesse to Sri Lanka. It should be noted that the spike in remittances in recent years reflects in part a crackdown on hundi, a traditional but informal as well as illegal, remittance mechanism that does not show up in official statistics.

Bangladeshi migrant workers gather in front of an airline's office in Dhaka to collect air tickets to go back to their workplaces in October 2020: remittances are the country's second-largest source of foreign exchange earnings. © NurPhoto/Getty Images

Bangladesh's recent success was far from preordained. The country is subject to frequent devastating cyclones and flooding, and it has had more than its fair share of political instability and internecine warfare between two political dynasties that go back to the country's founding.

nikkei

From remote villages to Mt. Everest base camp, COVID hits Nepal hard

When health workers finally arrived last month in the remote village of Namanta, up in the forested foothills of Nepal's Himalayas, residents hid in their homes.

They'd been advised not to welcome strangers, who might spread the coronavirus. But it was already too late. Out of 64 households in the village, 30 of them had someone who was ill.

Those individuals hadn't been able to get tested though: The nearest coronavirus testing facility was a 3-hour walk away. Nobody who was sick could make it that far. So as residents huddled in their homes, many of them coughing, they were frightened by the surprise arrival of strangers in surgical masks. One villager made a phone call. "They called us and said, 'There are these new people in town. They say they're here to help. What should we do?'" recalls Srijana Karki, the South Asia regional director for World Neighbors, a development charity based in Oklahoma.

Namanta is one of dozens of communities across Nepal – many of them high in rugged mountain terrain — where Karki and her colleagues run workshops teaching villagers how to farm their land sustainably, care for livestock and manage natural resources better.

The health workers who arrived in May had been dispatched by World Neighbors. The group's in-person workshops were on hold because of the pandemic, but Karki's staff stayed in touch with residents by phone and had heard reports of illnesses. She knew the village had no hospital or clinic. So she arranged for four health workers to visit the community to test people for the coronavirus and provide medical support.

When the team arrived, it was one of Karki's colleagues, Binu Subedi, who received the call from a frightened villager. Subedi, who is based in a larger town downhill from Namanta, asked them to put her on speaker phone and go house to house – keeping a distance, just standing in the doorways – and hold out the phone to neighbors inside so they could hear her.

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