# DOCTOR WATITI

## TOWARDS ZERO

# Is histoplasmosis an opportunistic infection?

**Q** **Dear Doctor,**
**My brother, who has been living with HIV for a long time and is on ARVs, developed a cough for a long time despite being treated with antibiotics. He was later found to be having TB, which was treated and we were told it had been cured. However, he never improved but continued to cough, had difficulty in breathing and was always tired. Later, he was diagnosed with a fungal chest infection called histoplasmosis. He has been put on antifungal drugs and he is improving slowly. Is histoplasmosis also an opportunistic infection like fungal meningitis?**

**Tom**

**A** Dear Tom,
Histoplasmosis is a respiratory infection caused by one inhaling spores of a fungus known as Histoplasma capsulatum, which are found in soil enriched with bird or bat droppings.

The disease causes one to have a chronic cough, which produces thick, yellow sputum or blood; which can mimic TB.

Someone can actually have both TB and histoplasmosis at the same time. Histoplasmosis is usually a primary infection, which means it can affect people who are HIV negative or whose immune system is normal.

However, people living with HIV whose immune system has been weakened by HIV are at higher risk of catching the infection just like they are at risk of developing opportunistic infections like fungal or cryptococcal meningitis, which is caused by another fungus known as Cryptococcus neoformans. Opportunistic infections attack people living with HIV who have CD4 counts below 200 cells/ml or what is known as advanced HIV disease.

So, it is possible that your brother had both TB and histoplasmosis, which explains why he did not improve, although TB was successfully treated.

This is because histoplasmosis is treated using antifungal drugs, like itraconazole taken orally for three to 12 months, depending on the severity of the infection or intravenous injections of amphotericin.

Therefore, your brother will need to continue taking the antifungal medicine prescribed for a longer time, because it takes longer to treat histoplasmosis compared to treating TB.

Lastly, it is important for all to know that someone can be attacked by more than one disease at the same time; hence the importance of looking at a person holistically, instead of focusing only on a disease one may be diagnosed with.

Some diseases like TB are common, while others like histoplasmosis are less common, however, when they are neglected they lead to preventable suffering or even death.