

Tuberculosis in childhood and adolescence: The situation after the COVID-19 pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on many aspects of child and adolescent health. Tuberculosis, a disease that is overlooked by many, reflects one more aspect of that impact. In 2020, most healthcare resources were allocated to fight the pandemic, and access to tuberculosis prevention and care was reduced.¹

Many people sick with tuberculosis were not treated in a timely manner because of the lockdown measures that had been established or because of fear of exposure to SARS-CoV-2. Global reporting reduced by 18% compared to 2019, and the number of tuberculosis deaths increased across all age groups. The decrease in detected cases was greater in pediatrics, with a 24% drop in the 0 to 14 years age group, and more evident in children under 5 years of age. There were also more treatment discontinuations and loss to follow-up.^{1,2}

To monitor whether the detection of tuberculosis cases is returning to normal after the health emergency, the cases reported in 2019 were compared with those reported subsequently. In Argentina, according to Bulletin 2023 issued by the Ministry of Health's National Program for the Control of Tuberculosis (Programa Nacional de Control de la Tuberculosis, PNCT),

12 569 tuberculosis cases were reported in 2021, a rate of 27.4 per 100 000 inhabitants, slightly lower than in 2019 (28.2 per 100 000 inhabitants).³

Incident cases of tuberculosis in children under 15 years of age in Argentina in 2021 were 16.4% less than in 2019; especially there was a lack of recovery in the detection of cases in children under 5 years of age (*Figure 1*).³ Infants and young children are at higher risk of rapid disease progression and of presenting severe forms of pulmonary and extrapulmonary tuberculosis, with higher morbidity and mortality than among other age groups. The diagnosis of tuberculosis at this stage of life is usually more difficult because it manifests with non-specific symptoms, common to other diseases. If tuberculosis is not considered in the differential diagnosis, many patients end up seeking care once severe symptoms have developed and may even die without the cause being known. For this reason, it is concerning the lack of recovery detected in the number of cases reported to the PNCT.

In addition, tuberculosis in adolescents, a source of active transmission of this disease in the community, has become a global health problem.² In Argentina, the upward trend in reported cases has been sustained since 2010 and, compared to 2019, tuberculosis in

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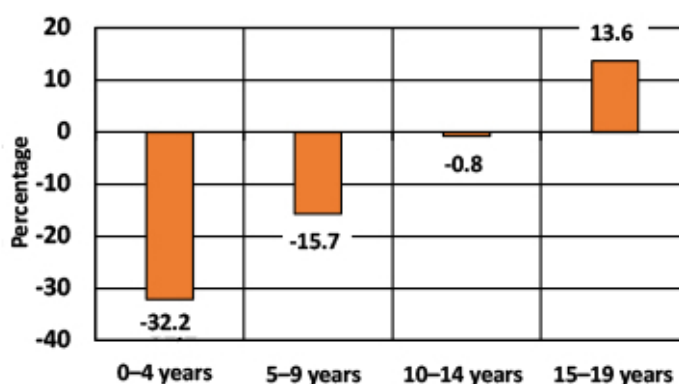
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FIGURE 1. Percent variation in tuberculosis cases reported between 2019 and 2021 by age group of children and adolescents³

Source: National Ministry of Health of Argentina. Bulletin no. 6, Tuberculosis in Argentina, based on data from the National Health Surveillance System recorded as of 1/30/2023.³

adolescents aged 15 to 19 years accounted for one of the largest increases in reporting, reaching 13.6% (1078 cases in 2019 and 1225 in 2021).³

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a marked negative impact on tuberculosis control in these vulnerable groups, who are also affected by the economic and social situation. The under-reporting and under-detection of tuberculosis in children under 5 years of age and uncontrolled tuberculosis in adolescents demonstrate the need to raise awareness of this problem, achieve greater effectiveness in the detection and timely diagnosis of tuberculosis in pediatric and adolescent consultations, systematize the study of contacts of people with tuberculosis disease, and encourage compliance with prevention and treatment measures. ■

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