

Tuberculosis (TB) Disease

What is tuberculosis (TB)?

Tuberculosis (TB) is caused by germs that are spread through the air when a person with infectious TB coughs or sneezes. Anybody nearby is at risk of breathing these air-borne TB germs into their lungs.

When these TB germs attack the lungs and grow, they cause damage to the lungs, and can spread these germs to other people. TB can also affect other parts of the body like glands, bones, joints, kidneys, reproductive organs. TB is not likely to be spread to others from these areas of the body.

Infection or Disease?

You have a TB *infection* when you have breathed TB germs into your lungs and your body's defenses have stopped them from growing. Even though you are infected, you will not feel sick, and you cannot spread TB germs to others.

However, if you have breathed the germs into your lungs and those germs start to grow and become active, you then have TB *disease*. You may or may not feel sick, *but when you have the disease you must remember that you can spread TB germs to those around you.*

What are the signs of TB?

Some signs of TB may include loss of appetite, weight loss, fatigue, fever or night sweats. If the TB disease is *in your lungs* you may also have chest pain, shortness of breath or a cough.

If TB affects other parts of your body, the symptoms may vary.

Where can I get tested for TB?

You can get tested for TB at your local health unit, or your doctor can arrange for you to have a test.

You can also get tested at the following clinics:

Vancouver Chest Clinic
655 West 12th Avenue
Vancouver, BC
Phone: 604-660-6108

New Westminster TB Clinic
#100 – 237 E Columbia Street
New Westminster, BC
Phone: 604-660-8826

TB Clinic
1952 Bay Street
Victoria, BC
Phone: 250-519-1510

How do they test for TB?

A tuberculin skin test is the first test given to check for TB. This is a two-part test. A small needle injects a small amount of a harmless test substance under the first layer of skin on your forearm. Although there is minimal risk, you will be asked to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes following the skin test to see if you experience any allergic reaction. The reaction you may get from this is a raised area where the needle was given.

The second part of the test is done two or three days later. You must go back to have your reaction to the injection measured. Depending on your reaction, you may need further tests, such as a chest x-ray or a sputum (spit) sample.

What are the chances of a TB infection becoming TB disease?

If you have TB infection, there is a five to ten per cent chance of developing tuberculosis over your lifetime. However, if your body's resistance to infection or germs is lowered, you are more susceptible to TB disease.

You can reduce the risk of TB infection developing into TB disease by using preventive treatment for twelve months.

What is the treatment for TB disease?

The good news is that TB *can* be cured, and all the testing and medications are provided free of charge. If you develop the disease, you *must* have treatment - to cure you *and* to prevent you from spreading the TB germs to your family and friends.

Treatment consists of taking several types of pills regularly for six to nine months. During this time, you will have several chest x-rays and sputum (spit) samples to check your progress.

Do I really have to take these pills every day for 6 to 9 months?

Yes. It is *really* important for you to take *all* the pills you are given, exactly as directed, until you have used up all your medication.

Some people with TB do not finish all the pills they are prescribed because they start to feel better. However, this does not mean they are cured of TB disease. TB germs are very difficult to get rid of. Even though you may start to feel better after only a few weeks or months of taking these pills, the germs are still active in your body, and you need to keep taking your pills until you finish the medication.

What if I do not take all my pills?

If you do not take *all* the pills you are given, for as long as the doctor or nurse tells you to, there is a good chance that the TB germs in your body will become resistant to the medicine.

If this happens, you may feel more ill than you were before, and you may need to have more treatments for a longer period of time. This is why it is very important for you to finish taking *all* your pills, *every day*, exactly as directed.

How do I keep from spreading TB germs?

When you start your treatment, you will still be able to spread the germs for another two to three weeks. To reduce the risk of giving TB to others, it is important to remember to:

- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing, sneezing or laughing;
- Use disposable tissue such as Kleenex® when coughing up and discard tissue in a waste basket;
- Be in well ventilated rooms;
- Avoid close contact with other people.

How do I know if I have spread TB germs?

TB is an infectious disease. Sometimes when you have active TB disease, you may spread TB germs to others around you without being aware.

You will be asked where and with who you have been in contact. All information you give will be kept confidential.

Any people you may have had contact with will be checked to see if they are infected too. If they are infected, they will be offered preventive treatment to make sure they do not develop TB disease.

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm or your local public health unit.

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For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

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