

Tuberculosis (TB) Skin Test

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 TB germs attack the lungs and grow, they cause damage to the lungs. People with TB germs growing in their lungs can spread TB germs to other people. TB can also affect other parts of the body like glands, bones, kidneys, and reproductive organs, although TB is not likely to be spread to others from tuberculosis in these parts of your body.

Infection or Disease?

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

You have TB *disease* when the TB germs in your body start to grow and become active. When you have the *disease*, you may or may not feel sick, but it is really important to remember that you can spread TB germs to those around you.

Why do I need a tuberculin skin test?

You can have TB germs in your body and not feel sick. The skin test is the only way to tell if you have a TB infection.

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.

In the Vancouver area, you can also get tested at the following clinics:

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

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

In Victoria:

TB Clinic
1952 Bay Street
Phone: 250-519-1510

How is the test done?

A tuberculin test is the first test given to check for TB. This is a two-part test.

In the first part, 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. If this area gets itchy, do *not* scratch it. Instead apply cold (e.g., an ice cube) to this area.

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.

What do the results mean?

When your skin test is measured, your test will be called either negative or positive.

If your skin test is negative, you probably do not have TB germs in your body. You may be asked to be re-checked in two months if you have had contact with someone with TB.

If your skin test is positive, it means you have TB germs somewhere in your body.

What does a positive skin test mean?

A positive skin test can mean one of the following:

- 1. A vaccination in the past**
You may have had a vaccination against TB, known as a BCG vaccination, when you were a child. It is unlikely your reaction to the skin test will be large, as the effects of this vaccine decrease with time.
- 2. TB Infection**
You have TB germs in your body but they are NOT growing and making you sick. At this stage, you cannot infect other people.
- 3. TB Disease**
You have active growing TB germs in your body and they may make you feel sick. If you have TB disease, you can infect others with your TB germs.

If you have a positive skin test, you will need to have more tests to determine which

of the three categories shown above apply to you.

A chest x-ray will be done to see if your lungs are affected. If your x-rays are abnormal, or you are feeling sick, you will be asked to give a sputum (spit) sample to test for TB germs.

What is the treatment for TB disease?

The good news is that TB *can* be cured, and all the testing and medications are 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 regularly taking several types of pills for six to nine months. During this time, you will have several chest x-rays and sputum (spit) samples to check your progress.

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

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call 8-1-1 for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

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

Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.

