

Tuberculosis (TB)

What is Tuberculosis (TB)?

TB is a serious disease caused by a germ (bacteria) that spreads through the air.

TB usually affects the lungs but can also affect other parts of the body like glands, bones, joints, kidneys, the brain and reproductive organs.

TB is curable. In British Columbia, medicines to prevent or cure TB are free through Provincial TB Services and public health units.

How does it spread?

TB spreads from person to person through the air when someone who is sick with TB in the lungs coughs, sneezes, sings or talks. A person must be in close contact with someone with untreated TB disease of the lungs for a long period of time and needs to breathe in TB germs for infection to occur. Not everyone with TB infection will become sick with the disease.

What is the difference between TB infection and TB disease?

Infection occurs when you breathe TB bacteria into your lungs and your body's defences stop the bacteria from growing and making you sick. A person with TB infection will not feel sick and cannot spread TB bacteria to others. This is also called "sleeping TB".

TB disease occurs when you breathe TB bacteria into your lungs and the bacteria start to grow in number, and they may spread throughout your body. You may or may not feel sick, as how you feel depends on where the TB bacteria are growing. When you have TB disease in the lungs, you might spread TB bacteria to those around you.

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

If you are healthy and a person with TB infection, you have a 5 to 10% chance of developing TB

disease over your lifetime. However, certain medical conditions may increase your risk of TB disease.

Talk to your health care provider if you have HIV infection, chronic kidney disease, cancer, diabetes or have a weak immune system due to medication.

What are the symptoms of the disease?

Symptoms of TB disease of the lungs include cough (dry or wet) for 2 weeks or longer, sputum, chest pain and shortness of breath. Sputum is mucous or phlegm that you cough up from deep inside your lungs. You may also have unexplained weight loss, fever, night sweats, loss of appetite and tiredness or fatigue. If it has affected other parts of your body, the symptoms may vary.

How can I be tested?

Visit your health care provider for a check-up if you have symptoms of TB disease or want to know if you have TB infection. Your health care provider will do a TB assessment and order the appropriate tests. There may be a cost depending on the reason for your TB test(s).

Your health care provider uses a tuberculin skin test or TB skin test (TST) to look for TB infection. The test tells you if your body has "seen" the TB bacteria before. It does not tell whether the TB bacteria are sleeping or awake. For more information about TB skin testing, visit [HealthLinkBC file #51d Tuberculosis \(TB\) skin test](#).

The TST results, your reason for testing and your general health may mean you need further TB testing. Further testing could include a TB blood test, chest x-ray or sputum collection.

A chest x-ray and sputum collection are usually used to test for TB disease. A chest x-ray is a picture of your lungs that your health care provider examines to see if TB bacteria are growing in your lungs. Your health care provider sends the sputum (mucous or phlegm from deep

in the lungs) to a lab to test for TB bacteria. For more information, visit [HealthLinkBC File #51b Sputum collection for tuberculosis \(TB\) testing](#).

Where can I get a TB skin test?

Depending on your reason for getting a TB skin test (TST), you may get it for free or you may have to pay if it is for school, work or volunteering. Service locations vary throughout the province. TSTs may be available at your public health unit, travel health clinic, pharmacy or doctor's office.

Contact your local health unit to find out where you can get a TST in your area. Visit [HealthLink BC Find health services](#) to search for your local health unit's contact information.

What is the treatment?

You can treat both TB infection and TB disease. All pills for TB treatment are free and available through Provincial TB Services and public health units. Your health care provider will monitor you closely while you take the medication.

TB Infection treatment: Treatment of TB infection helps prevent the "sleeping" TB bacteria from "waking up" and making you sick. The TB preventive treatment medicines are recommended for those people most likely to get TB disease.

Speak with your health care provider if you want to take TB preventive treatment. It is important that they make sure you don't have TB disease before starting TB infection medications. It is also important to understand the side effects of each pill and to know when you need to call your health care provider.

TB Disease treatment: Treatment of TB disease cures you and prevents spreading TB disease of the lungs to other people. A combination of pills is

used for 6 months or longer. It is important to take all the pills you received, as directed. TB treatment takes a long time because the TB bacteria are strong and hard to get rid of. It is also important to understand the side effects of each pill and to know when you need to call your health care provider.

During your treatment for TB disease, you will visit your health care provider regularly. They will ask you to provide chest x-rays and sputum to check that you are responding to treatment. Your health care provider will let you know when your treatment is complete.

How can I reduce the risk of giving TB to other people?

To help protect other people, it is important to tell your health care provider who you have been in contact with to help identify people at risk for TB infection. All information you give will be kept confidential.

If you have contagious TB disease of the lungs or throat, you can spread the bacteria to other people, so it is important to start treatment right away. Your health care provider will ask you to wear a mask and stay at home to decrease the risk of spreading the disease. This is called home isolation. It is a very important step you must take to protect other people. Your health care provider will tell you when you can stop home isolation. For more information, visit [HealthLinkBC File #51c Home isolation for tuberculosis \(TB\)](#).

For more information

For more information, including information about BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) clinics, visit www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/tuberculosis.



For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.