



TUBERCULOSIS (TB)

What is tuberculosis (TB)?

TB is caused by a germ that is spread through the air. These germs get into the air when a person with infectious TB coughs or sneezes, and anybody nearby is at risk for breathing these air-borne TB germs into their lungs.

When these TB germs attack the lungs and grow, they damage the lungs. TB can also affect other parts of the body like glands, bones, joints, kidneys, and reproductive organs. TB is not likely to be spread to others from tuberculosis in these areas of your 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 will vary according to the affected body part.

Where can I get tested for TB?

Your doctor can arrange for you to have a test.

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 needle injects a small amount of a harmless test substance under the first layer of skin on your forearm. The reaction you may get from this is a raised area around the site of the injection. 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 percent chance of developing tuberculosis over your lifetime. However, if your body's resistance is lowered by surgery, illness, stress, HIV infection, or by not taking care of yourself (heavy drinking, drug use, poor eating habits, etc.) you are more susceptible to TB disease. You can reduce the risk of TB infection developing into TB disease by going on preventive treatment for 12 months.

What is the treatment for TB disease?

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 samples to check your progress.

Do I really have to take these pills every day for six to nine 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 pills. Some people with TB don't finish all the pills they are given. This is often because as the pills **start** to work, they don't feel sick any more — they think they are cured and don't need to take the rest of the pills they were given. But just because they start to feel better doesn't 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 they are all gone.

What if I don't take all my pills?

If you don't 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 end up even sicker than you were before, and you may need to have another series of treatments for an even longer period of time. This is why it is extremely 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 during this time to:

1. cover your nose and mouth when coughing, sneezing or laughing;
2. use disposable tissue (i.e. Kleenex, Scotties) when coughing and discard the tissue in a waste basket;
3. be in well-ventilated rooms;
4. avoid close contact with other people.

How do I know if I have spread TB germs to my family or friends?

TB is a very infectious disease. Sometimes when you have active TB disease, you may spread TB germs to others around you without knowing it. Any persons you may have had contact with will be checked to see if they are infected too. If they are, they will be offered preventive treatment to make sure they don't develop TB disease. You will be asked where you have been and with whom you have been in contact. All information you give to Public Health officials will be kept confidential.

For additional information, contact your regional Public Health office or your family doctor.