

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET



Department of Health & Human Services

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## Tuberculosis

### What Is Tuberculosis Disease?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by germs that are spread from person to person through the air. TB usually affects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body, such as the brain, the kidneys, or the spine. A person with TB can die if they do not get treatment.

The general symptoms of TB disease include feelings of sickness or weakness, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. The symptoms of TB disease of the lungs also include coughing, chest pain, and the coughing up of blood. Symptoms of TB disease in other parts of the body depend on the area affected.

### How Is Tuberculosis Spread?

The germ is spread through the air when a person with active lung disease coughs or sneezes. It can be inhaled by someone who shares close breathing space, usually over a long period of time. TB is not highly contagious. People with TB disease are most likely to spread it to people who they spend close time with every day. This includes family members, friends and co-workers. Tuberculosis is not spread by brief contact in large, open areas or by handling a diseased person's eating utensils, books or furniture.

Not all people with TB disease are easily able to transmit the germ to others. TB disease with a productive cough is more easily spread to other people than Tuberculosis lung disease with a minimal cough. A person is less likely to spread TB disease once he/she is taking medicine for at least two weeks. Tuberculosis of other body-organs is generally not contagious.

### How Is Tuberculosis Diagnosed?

Infection with the TB germ is found by giving the tuberculin skin test (TST). The skin test material is placed just under the skin of the inner surface of the lower arm by needle and is read by measuring the amount of swelling two to three days later. A positive skin test shows infection with the TB germ at some time in the past, but does not indicate if a person has TB disease. Disease is diagnosed by symptoms, chest x-ray and other laboratory tests. Only five to ten percent of those infected with the TB germ ever develop TB disease.

It may take two to three months for the skin test to become positive after breathing the TB germ. Close contacts of a person with active TB disease who are negative on the first skin test should be retested in two to three months.

### How Is Tuberculosis Treated?

TB disease can be cured by taking several drugs for 6 to 12 months. It is very important that people who have TB disease finish the medicine, and take the drugs exactly as prescribed. If they stop taking the drugs too soon, they can become sick again; if they do not take the drugs correctly, the germs that are still alive may become resistant to those drugs. TB that is resistant to drugs is harder and more expensive to treat. In some situations, staff of the local health department meet regularly with patients who have TB to watch them take their medications. This is called directly observed therapy (DOT). DOT helps the patient complete treatment in the least amount of time.

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## **What Should I Do If I Think I Am Exposed?**

A person with latent TB infection cannot spread germs to other people. You do not need to be tested if you have spent time with someone with latent TB infection. However, if you have spent time with someone with TB disease or someone with symptoms of TB, you should be tested. You can be tested at your doctors office or you may come to the health department for information and free testing.

## **What Is Tuberculosis Infection?**

People with latent TB infection have TB germs in their bodies, but they are not sick because the germs are not active. These people do not have symptoms of TB disease, and they cannot spread the germs to others. However, they may develop TB disease in the future.

If you have latent TB infection but not TB disease, your doctor may want you to take a drug to kill the TB germs and prevent you from developing TB disease. The decision about taking treatment for latent infection will be based on your chances of developing TB disease. Some people are more likely than others to develop TB disease once they have TB infection. This includes people with HIV infection, people who were recently exposed to someone with TB disease, and people with certain medical conditions.

**For more information on Tuberculosis, call (248) 858-1406 or toll free 1 (800) 848-5533.**

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