

Tuberculosis

What is Tuberculosis (TB)?

Bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* cause TB. It usually affects the lungs, but can also infect other parts of the body.

How is TB Spread?

TB is spread through the air when someone with infectious TB coughs, sneezes, or talks and another person breathes the bacteria into his/her lungs.

To become infected, a person must have frequent, prolonged contact with someone who is infectious.

What is active TB?

If a person's immune system cannot stop the TB bacteria from growing, they will develop active TB.

Symptoms may include:

- cough
- coughing up blood or sputum
- fever
- night sweats
- weight loss
- tiredness

Active TB is considered infectious if it affects the lungs or airways. TB is likely not infectious if it has infected other areas of the body.

What is inactive TB?

Inhaling the TB bacteria does not usually make a person ill because the body's immune system is able to control the infection. The bacteria remain alive but inactive in the person's body. This is known as inactive TB, also called TB infection or latent TB. People with inactive TB are not sick and cannot spread TB to others.

Can inactive TB progress to active TB disease?

Yes, people with inactive TB may develop active TB if their immune system cannot stop the bacteria from growing. There is an approximate 5% risk of developing active TB within the first 2 years of becoming infected. After this, there is a 5% chance of developing active TB in the rest of a person's lifetime.

Who may progress to active disease?

The following people are most likely to progress to active TB disease:

- the very young and the elderly
- those experiencing significant stress
- those who have poor immune function related to various medical conditions.

All active TB cases are fully investigated by the health unit. Individuals who have had a significant exposure will be encouraged to have a TB skin test.

What is a TB skin test?

A small amount of liquid (tuberculin protein) is injected under the skin on your forearm. Two to three days later, you must return to have your arm checked and if there is a reaction (a hard, dense swelling), it will be measured. Only a reaction over a certain size is considered positive for exposure to TB.

What does a positive skin test mean?

A positive reaction usually means that you have been infected with the TB bacteria at some time in your life. A doctor will do further tests such as a chest x-ray and sputum samples, to make sure you do not have active TB. Both inactive and active TB will cause a positive reaction.

Treatment

In most cases, antibiotics are available that can treat active TB and prevent active TB from developing. The most common drugs used to fight TB are Isoniazid (INH), Pyrazinamide (PZA), Rifampin and Ethambutol. If you have inactive TB, your doctor may recommend medication also called prophylaxis, for 9 to 12 months. This will reduce the chance of inactive TB progressing to active TB. All medication for TB is free in Ontario.

HIV & TB Co-infection

HIV is a virus that weakens the immune system and makes fighting TB infection more difficult. Worldwide, TB is the leading cause of death among people living with HIV. Therefore, people with TB and HIV need to be educated about these diseases and treated as soon as possible.

Drug resistant TB

Drug resistant TB does not respond to the most commonly used treatments. When a person with active TB does not take their medications properly, the TB bacteria may become resistant to the drugs. In turn, this person may spread the drug resistant TB bacteria to others. There are varying levels of drug resistant TB found throughout the world. Some of these can be very difficult to treat. Therefore, it is very important to take all TB drugs as prescribed.

For more information, please call 519-376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456.

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