

Tuberculosis (TB)

What is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is caused by a germ that usually affects the lungs but can also affect other parts of the body such as lymph nodes, bones and kidneys.

How is TB spread?

TB is spread when a person with an active TB infection coughs, sneezes or talks. The germs travel from the lungs into the air. Those who spend a lot of time with someone who has TB may breathe the TB germs into their lungs and become infected.

Who is at risk of getting TB?

Anyone can get TB, but some people are at higher risk:

- Close contacts of someone with an active TB infection; people who live in the same home or share sleeping space
- People who come to Canada from countries with high rates of TB
- Those who have weakened immune systems due to illness or medications. This includes people with an HIV infection or who are taking medication to treat cancer.,
- People who live in crowded or poorly-ventilated spaces

What happens if someone is infected?

About 90% of people who become infected with TB get a latent tuberculosis infection, or LTBI. The germs are not active in the body so the person doesn't feel sick, doesn't have any symptoms and can't spread TB to others.

Those who do get sick have an active TB infection. The symptoms include:

- new or worsening cough lasting for more than three weeks
- coughing up phlegm (thick liquid that comes from your lungs) and/or blood
- fever and night sweats
- weight loss that isn't planned
- no appetite for food
- feeling unusually tired

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A person may have the symptoms for some time before they notice them. Even then, they may be mistaken for many other diseases.

How do I know if I have TB?

To test for LTBI, a tuberculosis skin test (TST) is used. A health care provider injects a small amount of non-infectious TB protein under the skin. This protein cannot spread the disease. It takes 2 days for the skin to react to the injection for a positive result.

People with symptoms will be asked to give a sample of their phlegm; called a sputum sample. They will also need an x-ray of their chest to assist the health care provider in diagnosing an active TB infection.

Can TB be treated?

Both LTBI and active TB infections can be treated, but the germs are strong so 6 to 9 months of medication are needed. The TBDHU provides support to people while they are completing their treatment.

If someone has a LTBI, they should consider getting treated because about 10% of people with LTBI develop an active TB infection in the future.

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns.

For further information contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318
or toll free 1-888-294-6630, ext. 8318.