

Information for Patients and Family Members

What is TB?

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.

TB germs are put in the air when a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, sneezes, speak or sings. These germs can stay in the air for several hours, depending on the environment. People who breathe in the air containing TB germs can become infected.

How do I know if I have TB?

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

There are two tests that can be used to help detected TB infection, a skin test or a TB blood test. The blood test measures how the patient's immune system reacts to the germs that cause TB. The skin test is performed by injecting a small amount of fluid (tuberculin) into the skin in the lower part of the arm. A person given a skin test must return to have it read in 48 to 72 hours to have a trained health care professional look for a reaction.

A positive test for TB infection only tells that a person has been infected with TB germs. It does not tell whether or not the person has progressed to TB disease. Other tests, such as a chest x-ray and a sample of sputum are needed to see whether the person has TB disease.

Can you cure TB?

TB disease is treated by taking several drugs for 6 to 12 months. It is very important that people who have TB disease finish taking the medicine and take the drugs exactly as prescribed. This is why taking the medicine is always observed by a trained health care provider. This keeps the patient from developing drug resistant TB and from getting sick again.

What is latent TB or TB infection?

People with TB infection (also called 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 disease to others. However, they may develop TB disease in the future. They are often prescribed medicine to prevent them from developing TB disease.

People with TB disease are sick from TB germs that are active, meaning that they are multiplying and destroying tissue in the body. They usually have symptoms of TB disease. People with TB disease of the lungs or throat are capable of spreading germs to others. They are prescribed drugs that can cure TB disease.

If you have (latent) TB infection but not TB disease, your doctor may want you to take medicine to kill the TB germs in your body. This will prevent you from developing TB disease. Treatment for TB infection is especially important for people with HIV infection, people who were recently exposed to someone with TB disease, and people with certain medical conditions.

A person with TB infection (latent TB infection) cannot spread germs to other people. You do not need to be tested if you have spent time with someone who has TB infection. However, if you have spent time with someone who has TB disease or symptoms of TB, you should be tested.

I had a BCG vaccine as a child. What is BCG and what effect does it have on testing?

BCG is a vaccine for TB disease used in many countries, but not in the United States. BCG vaccination does not completely prevent people from getting TB. It may also cause a false positive tuberculin skin test. People who have had BCG vaccine can be given a skin test or the TB blood test.

What if my family member has TB?

People with TB disease are most likely to spread the germs to people they spend time with every day, such as family members or coworkers. If you have been around someone who has TB disease, you should go to your doctor or your local health department for tests.

If you think that you have spent time with someone who has been diagnosed with TB, please contact us at 210-949-2000 or at the phone numbers listed below.

Remember, there are times when a patient may think he or she has been diagnosed with TB, but they have not. Please have the name and date of birth of the person who you believe has been diagnosed with TB.

If you have been exposed to TB, Region 8 and other health departments across the state of Texas can offer testing to you.

Contact information

- Questions? Here is our contact information:
 - Cases of TB or suspected TB – 210-949-2166
 - Contacts to cases or suspected cases of TB – 210-949-2195
 - Correctional facilities – 210-949-2194
 - General questions – 210-949-2000 (ask for TB department)

- Please address any mailed documents to:
 - Texas Department of State Health Services, Region 8
 - TB program
 - 7430 Louis Pasteur Dr.
 - San Antonio, TX 78229