

Tuberculosis (TB) Disease

What is tuberculosis (TB) disease?

TB is an infectious disease caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. TB most often affects the lungs but can occur anywhere in the body. There are two TB-related conditions: tuberculosis disease and tuberculosis infection. People with active TB disease usually feel sick, have symptoms and can spread TB to others. People with latent TB infection do not feel sick, have no symptoms, and cannot spread TB to others. This fact sheet discusses TB disease; please refer to the fact sheet on TB infection for more information on that condition.

Who gets TB disease?

There are certain factors that increase a person's risk of developing active TB disease. People with current medical conditions such as diabetes, HIV, substance abuse or kidney disease are at increased risk for getting active TB disease if they have TB infection in their body. Persons who were recently infected (within the last two years) with TB through close contact with someone they live with or spend a lot of time with also have a greater risk of developing active TB disease.

What are the symptoms of TB disease?

The general symptoms of TB disease include feeling tired, weight loss, fever and night sweats. The symptoms of TB disease of the lungs also include a bad cough that does not improve and lasts 3 weeks or longer, chest pain and coughing up blood. Symptoms of TB disease occurring outside of the lungs depend on the area affected.

How soon do symptoms appear?

There is no way to predict when or if symptoms will appear. Many people who are infected with TB bacteria never develop active TB disease. A few people may develop TB disease immediately after they are infected. People can also carry the infection for many years before they get active TB disease. Diseases such as diabetes, HIV, substance abuse and kidney disease weaken the immune system. People who have TB infection along with one of these diseases are more likely to develop active TB disease.

How do people know if they have TB disease?

People who have symptoms of TB disease (e.g., feeling tired, weight loss, night sweats, bad cough and chest pain) should be tested for TB infection. People who have spent time with a person who has active disease, come from a country where TB is common, or live in a close setting such as a homeless shelter, prison or jail should also get tested. This involves having either a TB skin test or TB blood test. If the TB test is positive, other tests such as a chest x-ray and a sample of sputum may be needed to determine if the person has active TB disease.

How is TB spread?

TB is spread through the air from person to person. The TB bacteria enter the air when a person with active TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, sneezes, speaks or sings. People nearby may breathe these bacteria into the lungs and become infected. Not everyone who has the TB bacteria in their body will ever become sick. A person with TB disease in the lungs or throat may spread the disease until he/she has been on appropriate treatment for a period of time.

Tuberculosis (TB) Disease

June 2013 – page 2

What is the treatment for TB disease?

People with TB disease must take several drugs for 6 to 12 months or longer. It is very important for people with TB disease to finish the medicine and take the drugs exactly as ordered. People who stop taking the drugs too soon can become sick again. If people do not take the drugs correctly, the bacteria may become resistant to the TB drugs.

What can be done to prevent the spread of TB disease?

A person with active TB disease may need to be isolated while contagious to prevent spreading the disease. When out of isolation for medical appointments, TB patients should cover the mouth and nose when coughing and may need to wear a mask. People with active TB disease must take all the TB medicine exactly as prescribed by the physician.

If a person is told that he or she is a contact to someone with active TB disease, the person should follow through with evaluation, testing, and treatment if needed.

How can I learn more about TB disease?

- 1) If you have concerns about TB disease, contact your healthcare provider.
- 2) Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/index.htm>.
- 3) Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/tb/>.