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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 latent tuberculosis infection (LTBI). People with active TB disease usually feel sick, have symptoms and can spread TB to others. People with LTBI 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 LTBI for more information on that condition.

Who gets TB disease?

Anyone can get TB, but there are certain factors that increase a person's risk of developing active TB disease if they are infected. People who smoke are at greater risk for both TB infection and progression to TB disease than those who do not smoke. People with certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, HIV, substance use, and immune compromising illness, 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 who has active TB disease 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 can also include a bad cough that does not improve and lasts three weeks or longer, chest pain, and coughing up blood. Symptoms of TB disease in other parts of the body depend on the affected area.

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. People who have TB infection and smoke, abuse recreational drugs or have diabetes, HIV or kidney disease 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, or 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 be 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, are 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 inhale these bacteria into the lungs and become infected. Not everyone who has the TB bacteria in their body will become sick with TB disease. A person with TB disease in the lungs or throat may spread the disease until they have been on appropriate treatment for a period of time.

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. If someone with active TB disease needs to be around others while they are still contagious, they 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?

- If you have concerns about TB disease, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the [VDH Local Health Districts page](#).
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [the CDC page on tuberculosis](#).

Translations

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