

Kent County Health Department

Tuberculosis Fact Sheet



What is tuberculosis (TB)?

TB is a disease caused by bacteria. It mostly affects the lungs. It can also affect other parts of the body such as the brain, kidney or spine.

TB bacteria become active if the immune system can't stop them from growing. This causes TB disease. Some people develop TB disease soon after becoming infected, before their immune system can fight the bacteria. Others may get sick later when their immune system becomes weak for some reason.

How is TB spread?

TB is spread from person to person through the air. The bacteria are put in the air when a person with TB disease coughs or sneezes. People nearby breathe in the bacteria and become infected. People with TB disease are most likely to spread it to the people they spend time with every day. This includes family members, friends, and coworkers.

Is TB infection different than TB disease?

Yes. People with TB disease are sick from the bacteria active in their bodies. They usually have one or more of the symptoms of TB. These people are often able to give the infection to others.

People with TB infection (without disease) have the bacteria that cause TB in their bodies. They are not sick because the germ is inactive. They cannot give the germ to others.

It is possible to have TB infection and never develop TB disease. In these people, the TB bacteria remain inactive for a lifetime without causing disease.

What are the symptoms of TB?

Symptoms depend on where in the body the bacteria are growing. TB bacteria grow mostly in the lungs. This may cause:

- A bad cough that lasts longer than two weeks
- Pain in the chest
- Coughing up blood or sputum (phlegm from deep inside the lungs)

Other symptoms of TB disease are:

- Weakness or tiredness
- Weight loss
- No appetite
- Chills
- Fever
- Night sweats

Who is at risk for TB?

Anyone can get TB. Some people are at higher risk. These include:

- Babies and small children
- People (family members, friends, coworkers) who share the same breathing space as someone who has TB disease
- People with low incomes who live in crowded conditions, have poor nutrition, and have poor health care
- Homeless people
- People born in countries where TB is common
- Nursing home residents
- Prisoners
- Alcoholics and injection drug users

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- People with certain medical conditions including diabetes, kidney failure, or weakened immune systems (from HIV or AIDS)

How is TB diagnosed?

A skin test done by your doctor or at the Health Department can tell if you have TB infection.

A positive skin test reaction usually means a person has been infected with TB. It does not always mean the person has TB disease. Other tests, such as an x-ray or sputum sample, are needed to see if a person has TB disease.

How is TB treated?

People with TB disease need to take several different drugs for at least six months. They still need to take the drugs even if they start feeling well after a few weeks of treatment. This is because there are many bacteria to be killed. Taking several drugs as prescribed will do a better job of killing all of the bacteria and stopping them from becoming resistant to the drugs. TB disease can almost always be cured with medicine.

People with TB infection (a positive skin test reaction without TB disease) and in one of the high risk groups will be offered to take medicine to keep from developing TB disease. This is called preventive therapy.

A single medication is usually used for preventive therapy. It kills the TB bacteria that are inactive in the body. If people take their medication as prescribed, preventive therapy will greatly reduce their chance of ever developing TB disease. Most people must take preventive therapy for at least nine months including children and people with HIV.

Most people with a positive skin test are offered and take preventive therapy. Everyone needs to know the symptoms of TB disease. If they develop symptoms later, they should see a doctor right away.

Should a person with TB be excluded from work or school?
People with TB disease of the lungs or throat are probably infectious. They need to stay home so they don't spread TB bacteria to other people. After taking their medicine for a few weeks, they will feel better and may no longer be infectious to others. Their doctor or nurse will tell them when they can return to work or school.

If you have TB disease:

- Get all the tests required by your doctor.
- Keep all your medical appointments.
- Take all your medications as prescribed.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about TB or think you may have it, call your health care provider.