



Tuberculosis

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Tuberculosis (TB) is a communicable disease caused by a bacterium. It spreads through the air in droplets that are coughed, sneezed or exhaled by someone who is infected. Usually tuberculosis infects the lungs, but it can also infect other parts of the body.

TB infects people of all ages and in every country. People who have weakened immune systems are at higher risk for TB and its complications. Those who live, work or go to school in crowded conditions are also at greater risk.

People can carry the TB bacteria without actually developing TB disease. Their immune systems are strong enough to prevent the bacteria from causing symptoms. This is called **latent TB**. Close to 90% of those who are infected with TB never get sick from it. They also cannot spread the infection while the bacteria remain inactive in their bodies.

The tuberculin skin test (**TST**) is used to detect latent TB. Many employers require that their employees have a TST yearly. Those who have a positive skin test, a measurable area of firmness at the test site, require further testing which may include a chest x-ray and sputum tests.

Doctors treat everyone who is infected with TB, even those without symptoms. By treating individuals who have latent TB, the tuberculosis bacteria can be prevented from ever causing illness.

The TST is also used when individuals have symptoms of TB such as cough, weight loss, fatigue, fever, night sweats, or bloody sputum. A positive skin test in a person with symptoms may indicate **active TB** disease. Chest x-ray and sputum tests are needed to confirm the diagnosis. Individuals who have active TB must remain out of public places (work, shopping centers, churches, etc.) until their doctor advises them it is safe to return. This is usually a week or two after starting antibiotics and only after the TB bacteria is no longer detected in their sputum.

TB bacteria can be very difficult to kill therefore treatment takes months, rather than days, as with other infections. It is extremely important for people being treated for TB to continue to take their medications faithfully for as long as they are prescribed. Otherwise, the bacteria can become resistant to the drugs: drug-resistant TB (**DRTB**). When a person develops DRTB and infects another individual, this individual's infection will also be resistant.

There are strains of TB that are multi-drug resistant (**MDRTB**) and extremely drug resistant (**XDRTB**). Treatment options for MDRTB and XDRTB are very limited and very long. These infections can be deadly, especially in those with weakened immune systems.

People with TB will be provided with medication and support from their local health department. TB can be deadly and it is in everyone's best interest that those who are infected receive prompt and complete treatment.