

Patient education: Tuberculosis (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis ("TB") is an infection that usually affects the lungs. It is not very common in the US. But in other parts of the world, TB is still a serious problem.

How does TB spread?

You can catch TB from anyone who is sick with it. The germ that causes TB can travel in the tiny drops of fluid that spray when a person coughs or sneezes. If you are exposed to the germ by breathing in these drops, you can get infected.

What happens if I am exposed to TB?

If you are exposed to the germ that causes TB, your body's infection-fighting system (the "immune system") will try to fight it. Sometimes, the immune system is able to kill off the germ, and you will not be infected.

Other times, the immune system is able to control the germs but not completely kill them off. When this happens, it is called "**TB infection**." Doctors used to call this "latent TB." That's because the germ is in your body but does not make you sick.

People with TB infection do not always get sick. But sometimes, they get sick later, even after months or years. When this happens, it is called "**TB disease**." Doctors used to call this "active TB."

What are the symptoms of TB disease?

The symptoms of TB disease can include:

- Long-lasting cough
 - Fever
 - Sweating at night
 - Losing weight without trying to
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Should I see a doctor or nurse?

See your doctor or nurse if:

- You have been near someone who was sick with TB disease.
 - You have a cough that has lasted longer than 3 or 4 weeks and does not seem to be getting better.
 - You have other symptoms of TB disease, such as fever, sweating at night, or unexpected weight loss.
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Is there a test for TB infection?

Yes. There are 2 tests for TB infection: a skin test and a blood test.

- Skin test – Your doctor or nurse gives you a shot in the arm. The shot contains tiny pieces of the dead TB germ. Then, 2 or 3 days later, your doctor or nurse looks at the spot where you got the shot to see if there is a bump, and how big the bump is. Only a doctor or nurse can tell whether the bump from a TB test is positive or negative.
- Blood test – A blood test for TB is available in many areas, but not everywhere.

Your doctor or nurse will decide which test is best for you. The choice depends on your risk of getting sick with TB disease.

What if my TB infection test is positive?

If your test is positive, you will probably get more tests to make sure that you do not have TB disease. Then, you will need treatment.

How is TB treated?

The treatment depends on whether you are sick:

- People who are not sick and have **TB infection** must take medicine for at least 3 months, and sometimes longer.
- People who are sick with **TB disease** must take 4 different medicines every day for at least 2 months. After that, some people can only take 2 of the medicines, but all people must keep taking some medicines for another 4 months. That means that treatment for TB disease lasts at least 6 months in total. People need to start with 4 medicines in case 1 or more of them stop working.

If your doctor or nurse gives you medicine to treat TB, it is very important that you take all of it. If you do not take all of the medicine, you could get sick with TB, or the medicine could lose its effect. If the medicine loses its effect, the infection can become even harder to treat.

The medicines used to treat TB can cause liver problems. While you are taking these medicines, do not drink alcohol or take [acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol). Tell your doctor or nurse if you have signs of liver problems. These include:

- Feeling very tired
- Nausea or vomiting
- Having no appetite

- Dark-colored urine
- Jaundice, which is when the skin or white part of the eyes turns yellow
- Belly pain
- Itchy skin

TB is a serious disease. It can lead to death. That's why it's so important that you take treatment very seriously.

More on this topic

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