

Tuberculosis - Fact Sheet

What is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease caused by an organism called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. The organisms usually infect the lungs but can infect other parts of the body such as the kidneys, gut or spine. Only people with the lung infection and a cough are infectious to other people. TB spreads through the air and when infectious people cough, sneeze, spit or talk it can pass to other people who may breathe in the organisms and become infected.

It is also possible to have the TB organism dormant (inactive) in the body not causing any symptoms at all. In this case, a person is not infectious to others.

What are the symptoms of active Tuberculosis?

It depends on where in the body the TB bacteria are growing. Symptoms of TB in the lungs are:

- ◆ A cough that will not go away
- ◆ Pain in the chest
- ◆ Coughing up blood

Other symptoms include:

- ◆ Fever, sweating at night, feeling tired, weight loss, lack of appetite

These symptoms can also occur with other types of lung disease. However, tests are available to distinguish TB from other causes. It is important to remember that a person with TB may also feel perfectly healthy or only have a cough from time to time.

Who gets Tuberculosis?

Anyone can get TB. There are some groups that are at a higher risk of getting TB and these include:

- ◆ People in close contact with someone who is infectious with TB
- ◆ People with medical conditions that make the body less able to protect itself from disease (e.g. diabetes, HIV/AIDS)
- ◆ People born in countries where there are high TB rates
- ◆ Health care workers

How is it spread?

Tuberculosis is spread when a person with untreated pulmonary TB coughs, sneezes, laughs and the organisms get into the air. Prolonged exposure to a person with untreated TB is usually necessary for infection to occur.

If you come into hospital with TB, or the doctors think you may have TB you will be put in a single room and all people coming into the room will wear face masks. You will need to wear a face mask if you go out of the room. This continues until TB lung infection is confirmed or ruled out. This is to protect staff and other people in the hospital from catching the TB organisms. For further information on isolation please read the 'Why am I in Isolation? Fact Sheet

For how long is a person able to spread tuberculosis?

Generally you are only infectious if you have TB disease in your lungs, i.e. if the TB is in the kidneys, bones or lymph nodes and not in the lungs you are not infectious to others. People with lung TB remain infectious until you have been on the right treatment for several weeks.

People who are infectious are most likely to spread it to people they spend lots of time with every day. This includes family/whanau, friends and co-workers and they may need to be seen by the Public Health Service.

What is the treatment?

You will be treated with a course of anti-tuberculosis medications for several months. These are extremely effective at curing TB, as long as taken correctly. Your doctor will determine the best treatment regime for you.

How can I prevent the spread of Tuberculosis?

- ◆ By following the instructions of the nursing/medical staff
- ◆ Wear the correct mask if you have to leave your room for any reason
- ◆ Take all the tuberculosis medicine exactly as prescribed by your doctor

What can be the effect of not being treated for tuberculosis?

- ◆ The disease can be spread to others
- ◆ An untreated person may become severely ill or die

Where can I get more information?

This fact sheet provides basic general information only and is to be used as a quick guide, not as a complete resource on the subject. If you have any further questions, ask your own doctor, local health unit or health care worker. The Auckland Regional Public Health service also has information on Tuberculosis.