Region of Peel
Working for you
Public Health

BCG VACCINATION

What is BCG?

BCG is a live vaccination against tuberculosis (TB). BCG stands for Bacille Calmette-Guerin after two doctors who introduced the vaccination. It is the only vaccination available against TB today.

BCG is used in areas of the world which have high rates of TB and where the chances of exposure to an infectious case are high. It is used because it is effective in reducing the severity of TB disease in infants and young children. BCG does not provide permanent or absolute protection against TB.

In Canada BCG is rarely used because TB is not widespread and the chances are small that infants and young children will become exposed. The exception to this is First Nation or Inuit infants in communities with high rates of TB.

Another reason BCG is not used in Canada is because it may cause a TB skin test to convert from negative to positive. This presents problems in the interpretation of TB skin test reactions as it can not be certain whether a positive reaction is due to infection with TB or vaccination with BCG.

Who is given BCG?

In countries with high rates of TB, BCG is given to infants and children to help prevent the more serious forms of TB disease, like TB meningitis or miliary TB, which can often lead to death. In some countries BCG is given several times during childhood and early adult life, in an effort to maintain some protection against TB.

Does BCG work?

BCG is effective in the prevention of serious forms of TB. Unfortunately the protection BCG offers in infants and young children does not extend to the adult life. Thus many people develop active TB even though they received BCG, even in multiple doses, in earlier years.

Although BCG has been used widely for a long time, one third of the world's population has TB infection and two million people a year world-wide die of TB. The rates of TB in countries that use BCG have not changed. BCG alone is not enough to stop the spread of TB.

However, in areas of the world with high rates of TB the risk of children developing severe TB is high enough to make the use of BCG worthwhile.

Could BCG cause a positive TB skin test?

If effective, BCG can cause a positive skin test. However, as time goes by, not everyone who had BCG will continue to have a positive skin test. If you have a positive skin test and are from a part of the world where TB is common, it is more likely due to TB exposure and not the BCG vaccine.

BCG is not a contraindication to having a skin test.

For more information, call Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700 (Monday to Friday 8:30 am – 4:30 pm)
or visit www.peel-stoptb.ca

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