

Tuberculosis (TB) & Tuberculin Skin Test (TST) Fact Sheet

What is TB?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by germs that are spread from person to person through the air. TB usually affects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body, such as lymph nodes, the kidneys, or the spine.

What are the symptoms of TB?

The general symptoms of TB disease include feelings of sickness or weakness, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. The symptoms of TB disease of the lungs also include coughing and chest pain. Symptoms of TB disease in other parts of the body depend on the area affected.

How is TB spread?

TB germs are put into the air when a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, sneezes, speaks or sings. People with TB disease are most likely to spread the germs to people they spend a lot of time with every day, such as household or family members.

Persons who breathe in the air containing TB germs can become infected; this is called latent TB infection.

What is the difference between latent TB infection and TB disease?

People with *latent TB infection* have TB germs in their bodies, but they are not sick because the germs are not active.

These people do not have symptoms of TB disease, and they cannot spread the germs to others. However, they may develop TB disease in the future. They are often prescribed treatment to prevent them from developing TB disease.

People with *TB disease* are sick from TB germs that are active, meaning that they are multiplying and destroying tissue in their body. They usually have symptoms of TB disease. People with TB disease of the lungs or throat are capable of spreading the germs to others. There are prescribed drugs that can treat TB disease.

Why is latent TB infection treated?

If you have latent TB infection but not TB disease, your doctor may want you to take medicine to kill the TB germs to prevent you from developing TB disease. The decision about taking treatment for latent infection will be based on your chances of developing TB disease. Some people are more likely than others to develop TB disease once they have TB infection. This includes people who were recently exposed to someone with TB disease, and people with certain medical conditions.

How is TB disease treated?

TB disease can be treated by taking medication. The treatment usually takes 6 to 12 months and all TB medication is provided free of charge. It is very important that people who have TB disease finish the medicine, and take it exactly as prescribed. If they stop taking the medicine too soon, they can become sick again. If they do not take the medicine correctly, the germs that are still alive may become resistant to the medicine. TB that is resistant to medicine is harder to treat. In some situations, staff at Peel Public Health will meet regularly with clients who have TB to help them with their medications. This is called Directly Observed Therapy (DOT). DOT helps the client complete treatment in the least amount of time.

How do you get tested for TB?

The tuberculin skin test (TB skin test) is performed by injecting a small amount of fluid (called tuberculin) into the skin in the lower part of the arm. A person given the tuberculin skin test must return within 48 to 72 hours to have a doctor or nurse look for a reaction on the arm. Even if you are pregnant or have had BCG vaccine in the past, you can still safely receive a TB skin test.

What reaction can I expect at the site of a TB skin test?

There may be swelling or redness at the test site and slight discomfort such as itching, this is normal.

What does a positive TB skin test mean?

A positive tuberculin skin test shows that a person has been infected with TB germs. It does not tell whether or not the person has progressed to TB disease. Other tests, such as a chest x-ray and a sample of phlegm (sputum), are needed to see whether the person has TB disease.

What if I have been vaccinated with BCG?

BCG is a vaccine for TB. This vaccine is not widely used in Canada, but it is often given to infants and young children in other countries where TB is common. BCG vaccine does not always protect people from getting TB. If you were vaccinated with BCG, you may have a positive reaction to a TB skin test. This reaction may be due to the BCG vaccine itself or due to an infection with the TB bacteria.

Still have questions?

Contact Region of Peel – Public Health at
Tel: 905-799-7700

Monday to Friday 8:30 am to 4:30 pm.

For information on TB:
visit www.peel-stoptb.ca