

BACILLE CALMETTE-GUERIN (BCG) VACCINATION

What is BCG?

BCG is the only TB vaccination currently available, but it does not provide permanent or absolute protection against TB. It is used in areas of the world where TB is common and the chance of being exposed to contagious TB is high. BCG helps reduce the severity of TB disease in infants and young children.

Who is given BCG?

In countries with high rates of TB, BCG is given to infants and children to help prevent serious forms of TB disease, such as 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 give some 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 be exposed. The exception to this is infants in First Nation or Inuit communities with high rates of TB. Another reason BCG is not used in Canada is because it may cause a TB skin test to become positive. This makes it difficult to interpret TB skin test reactions as it can be unclear whether a positive skin test is due to TB infection or vaccination with BCG.

Does BCG Work?

BCG is effective in preventing serious forms of TB. Unfortunately, the protection BCG offers in infants and young children does not extend into adult life. Therefore, many people develop active TB even though they received BCG 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 die of the disease each year. The rates of TB in countries that use BCG have not changed. BCG alone is not enough to stop the spread of TB.

Could BCG Cause a Positive TB Skin Test?

BCG can cause a positive TB 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 TB skin test and are from a part of the world where TB is common, the positive skin test is more likely due to TB infection and not the BCG vaccine.