

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Tuberculosis

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What is tuberculosis (TB)?

TB is an infection or disease caused by a germ that you breathe into your lungs. There are two forms of TB: TB infection and TB disease.

What is TB infection?

TB infection means you have a small number of TB germs living in your body, but they are not harming you - your immune system is keeping them from causing problems. You feel fine, you are not sick and you cannot give TB germs to anyone. If you have TB infection and your immune system becomes weak, your TB infection can develop into TB disease. TB infection is sometimes called “dormant” or “sleeping” TB.

What is TB disease?

TB disease means you have a large number of TB germs living in your body and the germs are causing harm. Usually you feel sick, and you often can spread TB germs to others. TB disease can be found in any part of your body but it usually affects your lungs. The most common symptoms of TB disease are coughing, fever, loss of appetite, weight loss, weakness, night sweats and feeling very tired.

Is there a test for TB infection?

Yes. You can get a test for TB infection through your doctor, nurse or health center. Once you have the TB test you **must** remember to return to your doctor, nurse or health center in 2 or 3 days to have the test checked. If you return after 3 days, the test may have to be repeated. If your test is positive, it means that you have TB germs, and your doctor may order a chest x-ray to be sure you are not sick with TB disease. There is also a new blood test for TB infection. You can ask your doctor or nurse about it.

Can TB infection be treated?

Yes. If you have TB infection, you may be given medicine to prevent your TB infection from becoming TB disease. You will take the medicine for 6 to 9 months.

Can TB disease be treated?

Yes. If you have TB disease, you will take several TB medicines for 6 to 9 months to cure TB disease.

How are TB germs spread to others?

TB germs are spread to others when someone who is sick with TB disease of the lungs coughs or sneezes TB germs into the air. People who are living, working or spending a lot of time with this person can breathe in the TB germs and get infected.

Can you get infected with TB by handling food?

No. TB germs are spread from person to person through the air only. You cannot get infected with TB germs by handling food or other objects.

What is drug resistant TB disease?

Drug resistant TB disease is caused by TB germs that cannot be killed with common TB medicines. If you have drug resistant TB disease, you may have to take several TB medicines for at least 12 months. You can develop drug resistant TB disease if you do not take your TB medicines according to the directions or if you stop taking the medicines before your treatment is over. Your doctor will tell you when to stop taking your TB medicine.

What is BCG?

BCG is a vaccine against TB that is given in countries where TB is common. It can help prevent infants and small children from getting sick with TB disease. At best BCG protects children for 5 to 10 years, and sometimes it does not protect against TB at all. It is rarely used in the United States because people who have had BCG can still get TB infection, and many still get TB disease. People who had BCG more than 10 years ago and now have a positive TB test most likely have TB infection.

Where can I get more information about TB?

- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under “government”)
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Tuberculosis Prevention and Control at (617) 983-6970 or <http://www.state.ma.us/dph/cdc/tb/index.htm>.

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