

TB – AN OVERVIEW

Tuberculosis (TB) is a serious illness that can affect anyone. It is caused by TB bacteria, which can become airborne when someone with TB in their lungs talks, coughs or sneezes.

If you breathe in TB bacteria, one of three things will happen:

- your body kills off the bacteria before they can cause harm
- the TB bacteria make you ill – this is called ‘active TB’
- the TB bacteria remain asleep in your body – this is called ‘latent TB’.

Active TB:

If you have active TB, you will feel increasingly ill and could pass TB on to others. Common symptoms include a cough, fever, night sweats, weight loss, loss of appetite and tiredness.

Active TB can be cured with antibiotics.

Latent TB:

If you have latent TB, you will not have symptoms and you cannot pass TB on to others. This is because the TB bacteria are ‘asleep’ in your body, kept under control by your immune system. However, the bacteria might ‘wake up’ at any time, making you ill. This is more likely if your immune system comes under stress. Antibiotic treatment can help stop this happening.

Am I at risk from TB?

You may be more at risk from TB if you:

- have links to a country where TB is common
- know someone who has, or has had, TB
- have a health condition or lifestyle that weakens your immune system
- live in crowded or poorly ventilated accommodation
- work in a health or social care setting

If you have settled in England in the last five years?

If you have settled in the UK in the last five years, from a country where TB is more common, you may receive an invitation for latent TB testing. This test is different to the chest x-ray that you may have received as part of your visa application process.

It is a good idea to accept this invitation, to protect your future health.

Did you know?

Without treatment, there is a 1 in 10 chance that latent TB will become active TB in your lifetime.

You can still develop TB if you have had the BCG vaccination – the BCG is not 100% effective.

TB chest x-rays can only detect active TB in the lungs – you could still have latent TB.

About TB diagnosis

If you have any symptoms of active TB or you are concerned about latent TB, call your GP surgery for an appointment. If you do not have a GP, you can find out about registering at www.nhs.uk. GP services are open to everyone in the UK.

At your appointment, the doctor will ask questions to understand your risk from TB and to look for any symptoms of active TB. The doctor may then recommend one of three tests:

TB skin test or blood test – these two types of test look to see if you have ever been in contact with TB bacteria.

A chest x-ray – this looks for signs of active TB in the lungs.

If you have a positive result to any of these tests, you will be offered further diagnostic tests and appropriate treatment under the care of TB specialists.

About TB treatment

Active TB: treatment for active TB takes at least six months and usually involves four antibiotics.

Latent TB: treatment for latent TB is often shorter and involves fewer antibiotics than treatment for active TB.

TB treatment can come with side effects, as with all medicine, but your TB consultant or nurse will be there to support you.