Northern Territory Government

Centre for Disease Control

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Tuberculosis

What you need to know

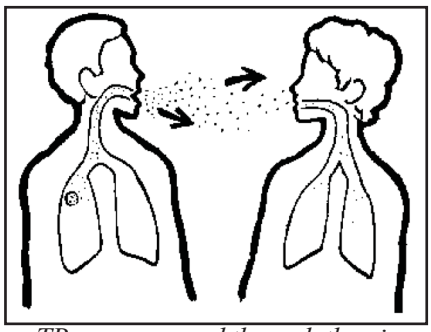
People of all ages, all nationalities and all incomes can get tuberculosis (TB). Each year about 1,000 people in Australia get TB disease. Between 20 and 30 cases occur in the Northern Territory each year. In almost all instances, ***TB can be cured***.

What is Tuberculosis?

TB is an infectious disease caused by the germ *Mycobacterium tuberculosis.* TB usually affects the lungs but can affect any part of the body.

How is TB Spread?

TB is spread when people who have active untreated TB bacilli (germs) in their lungs or throat, cough, sneeze or speak and send their germs into the air. Other people who breathe these germs into their lungs can become infected. People who breathe in TB germs usually have had close contact with someone who has the disease. TB is not spread by handling objects that the patient has come in contact with eg. dishes, drinking glasses, sheets or clothing.



TB germs spread through the air

Is TB hereditary?

No. This belief arose because those in closest contact to the patient are those most likely to get infected and are often family because they share the same air.

What does having 'TB infection' mean?

After TB germs enter the body, in most cases, body defences control the germs by building a "wall" around them, the way a scab forms over a cut. The germs can stay alive inside these walls for years in an 'inactive' or latent state. This is referred to as latent TB infection (LTBI). While TB germs are inactive, they cannot harm the person and ***they cannot spread to other people***. The person is infected but not sick and is unlikely to be aware that he or she is infected. The only way to tell the germs are there is by having a Mantoux test (tuberculin skin test). Inactive TB germs cannot hurt you but, if the body defences are weakened for any reason, inactive TB germs may weaken the "wall" and become active and multiply to become disease.

What is TB Disease?

TB disease is a serious illness caused by active TB germs. If body defences are weak, it is possible to get TB disease shortly after the germs enter the body. It is also possible for inactive TB germs to become active when body defences are weakened. This may be years later due to aging, a serious illness, developing diabetes, drug or alcohol abuse, or HIV infection.

What are the signs of TB?

TB can affect any part of the body but the lungs are the most common target. People with TB disease may have some or all or the following symptoms: persistent cough for more than 3 weeks, fevers, weight loss, night sweats, feeling tired and weak, loss of appetite, enlarged glands.

A person with TB disease may cough up blood stained sputum. People with active TB disease may only have mild symptoms. They may be spreading their germs to others without even knowing that they have TB.

What are the tests for TB?

There are a variety of tests, depending on the part of the body infected, but nearly all cases of TB have 3 tests. These are:

1. The Mantoux test shows if a person has been infected with TB germs. It does not mean that he/she has TB disease.
2. A chest X-ray shows if any damage has been done to the lungs and the extent of the damage. A large amount of the lungs may be involved before major signs and symptoms occur.
3. A sputum test shows if TB germs are present in the sputum. Their presence is proof of active pulmonary TB. The germs may be seen under the microscope called “a smear” or they may take up to eight weeks to grow in a medium called a “culture”.

Who should get checked for TB?

- People who have symptoms of TB.
- Recent contacts of someone who has active TB disease. This could be a family member, friend, or co-worker.
- Those who have a chest X-ray suggesting that they have had untreated TB disease in the past.
- People who have lowered immunity such as HIV infection or certain medical conditions.
- People who are required to be tested for employment reasons or as part of a school screening program.
- People who are about to undergo organ donation or transplantation.
- People travelling to a high-risk country should have a Mantoux test to establish a baseline of previous exposure.

What is the treatment for TB?

Most people who have TB will begin treatment by taking at least 4 different types of tablets. After several months this may be reduced.

These tablets can cure TB if taken for at least 6 months. The tablets are given to the patient by direct supervision usually by a health care worker 3 times a week.

Sometimes TB germs are resistant. This means that the TB tablets that are most often used do not kill the TB germs. When this happens, combinations of other medications are given. Resistant TB is harder to cure and it takes more time to control, but most people with resistant TB can be treated. Your doctor will make sure specific tests are done to check for drug resistance.

Is TB curable?

Yes. TB is almost 100% curable with modern treatment. To be effective, treatment requires the full co-operation of the patient. Early diagnosis, followed by prompt treatment, helps in preventing spread to others and reducing disability after cure.

Can TB patients infect other people?

Only lung or throat TB is infectious. Usually, after 3 or more weeks of taking effective medication, most patients with lung or throat TB will stop spreading germs. Most TB patients can then be discharged from hospital and can resume normal activities ***but are not yet cured***. It is important to continue to take the tablets as ordered and the person is checked regularly by the clinic staff. Should any side effects develop speak at once with health care providers.

For further information contact the TB Clinic in your region

Alice Springs	8951 7548
Darwin	8922 8804
Katherine	8973 9049
Nhulunbuy	8987 0282
Tennant Creek	8962 4259

or www.nt.gov.au/health/cdc