
What is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (also known as TB) is an infectious disease caused by bacteria. It usually infects the lungs, but can attack almost any part of the body. It is very common worldwide but is not often seen in Scotland. Left untreated it can be very serious or fatal.

How does it spread?

There are different types of TB but usually only people with lung TB are infectious.

Coughing or sneezing throws out droplets containing TB bacteria. A person needs to breathe in these droplets for a long period of time to become infected. Symptoms can take anything from 2-3 months to 60 years to appear.

Who is at risk?

In most people, the body's immune system kills the bacteria before they start to cause symptoms, and the person does not get ill. Anyone can get TB, but some groups such as the very young and old are more likely than others to get TB.

What are the symptoms if TB?

A few people become ill with TB (this is called active TB) within a few weeks or months. In other people the bacteria are not killed but they become dormant (state of rest), so that the person does not get ill and is not infectious. This is called latent TB. If the bacteria start multiplying again months or years later, the person develops active TB. In most cases this will not happen. Symptoms will vary from person to person and which part of the body is infected. They will include the following:

- ❖ A cough lasting more than 2 weeks
- ❖ Coughing up blood or sputum (phlegm from deep inside the lungs)
- ❖ Chest pain
- ❖ Weakness or tiredness
- ❖ Weight loss
- ❖ Chills, fever, and night sweats
- ❖ Lumps in neck or joint swelling

It is important to know that other conditions can cause some of the above symptoms

Can it be prevented?

A vaccination against TB, called the BCG is now only given routinely to babies born into families with a higher risk of coming into contact with TB than the general population. It may be offered to others such as people coming to live in the UK from countries with high levels of TB, health care workers and some people under 35 who have been in close contact with someone who has TB. The vaccine does not provide protection against all forms of TB. In most cases, the infection is kept in check by the body's immune system.

How is it detected?

One way to diagnose TB in the lungs is by examining the sputum under a microscope. A skin test (Mantoux) can be done to see if a person has been exposed to TB in the past. The area is checked a few days later. If a large enough area of skin has become raised and reddened (called a positive result) this could mean you have latent TB. Further tests will need to be carried out as reddening can also have other causes. A chest x-ray can be helpful.

For people thought to have TB in another part of the body, doctors may take a small sample of tissue from the area (called a biopsy), or remove a few cells or fluid from the area using a needle. The sample will be checked to see if it contains TB bacteria.

How is it treated?

In most cases, TB disease can be cured with anti-TB drugs. To work, the drugs must be taken exactly as prescribed. TB bacteria die very slowly. Medication must be taken for 6 months or longer.

Who needs screening for TB?

Usually only close contacts of someone with active TB need screening. Close contacts are those who share a bedroom, bathroom or sitting room with them. If the person has TB bacteria in their sputum it may include people who spend a lot of time with them such as very close work colleagues, girlfriends and boyfriends. Most work colleagues do not need screening. Some healthcare workers with a lot of close contact with a person later found to have active TB may need to be screened.

It is unusual to find TB in others, even close contacts.

Close contacts of TB can continue to attend work or school if well.

If you have been advised to undergo screening tests these include a skin test and or a chest X-ray. A blood test may also be advised. A vaccine against TB (called a BCG) may be offered depending on individual circumstances. Not all close contacts will need it.

If your screening test(s) show no sign of infection further action may not be needed. It is important to seek medical advice if you develop symptoms of TB as described earlier.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

This document is available on request in different languages, audio tape, Braille format, large print or BSL DVD. Please contact:

NHS Borders on 01896 825522 or email equality@borders.scot.nhs.uk

Produced by: Public Health Dept, NHS Borders, Education Centre, Borders General Hospital, Melrose, TD6 9BD, 01896 825560

June 2014