

Harris County

HCPHES

Public Health & Environmental Services

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Tuberculosis (TB) FACT SHEET

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. The bacteria can affect any part of the body, but usually affects the lungs. If not treated properly, TB disease can be fatal.

How is TB spread?

TB is generally spread through the air from one person to another by sneezing, coughing, speaking or singing. Persons who breathe in the air containing these TB germs can become infected with TB. Typically, only close contacts of a person who has TB disease such as family members, friends, classmates and co-workers are considered to be at risk.

What are the symptoms of TB?

The general symptoms of TB disease include feelings of sickness or weakness, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. When TB disease affects the lungs, additional symptoms may include a bad cough that lasts longer than 2 weeks, shortness of breath, pain in the chest and coughing up blood. Symptoms of TB disease in other parts of the body depend on the area affected.

How is TB *infection* different from TB *disease*?

- **TB infection**

People with TB infection have TB germs in their bodies but they are not sick because the germs are not active. They do not have symptoms, do not feel sick, cannot spread TB to others, usually have a positive skin test and can develop active TB disease if not treated for TB infection. If you have TB infection, it is important to talk to your health care provider about treatment options.

- **TB disease**

People with TB disease are sick from TB germs that are active, meaning that the germs are destroying the body's tissues and causing symptoms as a result. These people usually have symptoms of TB disease, often have a positive skin test and may have an abnormal chest X-ray. Because people with TB disease may spread the germs to others they are prescribed drugs to cure the disease. If you have TB disease, it is very important to follow instructions from your health care provider.

What should I do if I have been exposed to someone with TB disease?

People with TB disease are most likely to spread the germs to people they spend time with every day, such as family members and co-workers. If you have been around someone who has TB disease, you should contact your healthcare provider or your local health department to get tested.

How do I get tested for TB?

A TB skin test is performed by injecting a small amount of fluid into the skin on the lower part of the arm. A person being tested must then return within 48-72 hours to have a trained health care worker look for a reaction on the arm to see if the skin test is positive or negative. You can get a skin test at your local health department or at your healthcare provider's office.

If you have a positive reaction to the skin test, your healthcare provider may do other tests, such as getting a chest x-ray and/or collecting a sample of sputum in a special container, to see whether you have TB disease.

You should get tested for TB if:

- you have spent time with a person with known or suspected TB disease
- you have HIV infection or another condition which increases your risk for TB disease
- you are from a country where TB disease is very common (these include most countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe as well as Russia)
- you live somewhere in the United States where TB disease is more common (homeless shelters, migrant farm camps, jails and some nursing homes)
- you inject drugs

How is TB disease treated?

TB disease can usually be cured by taking several drugs for 6-12 months (or sometimes longer). It is very important that people who have TB disease finish the medicine and take the drugs exactly as prescribed. If they stop taking the drugs too soon, they can become sick again; if they do not take the drugs correctly, the germs that are still alive may become resistant to those drugs. Once TB disease becomes resistant to drugs, it is more difficult to treat and may involve taking more medications for longer periods of time. .

To make an appointment for TB services, call Harris County Public Health & Environmental Services (HCPHES) at 713-439-6214 or Houston Health Department of Health of Human Services (HDHHS) at 713-794-9999.

For additional information on tuberculosis, please visit www.hcphe.org.