

# Tuberculosis

## What is it?

Tuberculosis (known as TB) is a serious disease caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. It usually affects your lungs, but can also affect other parts of your body such as glands, brain or kidneys.

## What are the signs?

Symptoms of TB disease include:

- A cough lasting 3 weeks or more, often with thick phlegm or blood
- Difficulty breathing
- Tiredness and weakness
- Fevers
- Night sweats
- Weight loss
- Swollen glands

### Latent TB infection

A person with latent TB has TB bacteria in their body, but has no symptoms, because the bacteria are inactive or 'sleeping'. A person with latent TB infection cannot pass on the infection to others.

A few people with latent TB go on to develop TB disease. Some people with latent TB are offered medication to reduce the chance of the TB infection becoming active or 'waking up' and causing TB disease.

## How serious is it?

TB is a serious disease. It can be treated and cured with antibiotics, but if people with TB do not get the proper treatment they can die.

Tuberculosis is a notifiable disease under the Health Act. This means your doctor must tell the District Health Board (DHB) if you have it. People with TB will be contacted by a Public Health Nurse from the DHB for support during the treatment programme, and help protect their close contacts.

## Who is most at risk?

You are at greater risk of getting TB if you have a lot of contact with someone with TB disease in their lungs, for example if you live or work closely with someone with infectious TB. Living in crowded conditions with lots of people increases your risk. TB is much more common in other countries, and in people who have lived in these countries:

- Most of Africa
- Much of South America
- Russia and the former Soviet States
- Indian subcontinent
- China
- South East Asia (except Singapore)
- Some Pacific Islands

People with medical conditions that weaken the immune system are most at risk of severe disease, but anyone can become very sick with TB. Smoking increases the risk of developing TB disease in those with latent TB infection.

If you or your child is unwell, call your family doctor or Healthline on 0800 611 116 for free advice from a registered nurse 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

For further information call Public Health on (04) 570 9002 or visit [www.rph.org.nz](http://www.rph.org.nz)

**Te Whatu Ora**  
Health New Zealand

Capital, Coast, Hutt Valley and Wairarapa

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## How could I get infected?

You get infected when you breathe in air containing the TB bacteria. Bacteria gets in the air from someone with TB in their lungs who is coughing or sneezing. TB bacteria can stay in the air for several hours. You need to live or work closely with a person who has TB disease, as it usually takes many hours of close contact to get infected.

## How do I protect myself and others?

In the past babies at risk of catching TB were given the BCG vaccine soon after birth. However, since 2015 there has been an ongoing global shortage of BCG vaccine. If you are pregnant your lead maternity care will assess the risk of TB for your baby, and offer advice if they are at risk. Updates on the vaccine situation can be found at <http://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/tuberculosis/temporary-cessation-bcg-vaccination-until-further-notice>

Travelers to areas where TB is common should avoid close contact with people who are known to have TB.

If you have been in close contact with someone with TB disease, you will be contacted by Regional Public Health to be tested for TB. This may include a chest x-ray, a blood test, a skin test or giving a sample of phlegm. If you are worried you may have been exposed to someone with TB you should contact your population health service or your doctor.

If you have TB disease a public health nurse will give you instructions on how to protect other people. You will be placed in isolation until your TB is no longer infectious. During this time you will not be able to go to shopping centres, movies, parties or any social gatherings. You should cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and place the used tissue straight into a rubbish container. You will remain in isolation until your phlegm samples no longer contain TB bacteria.

It is very important that you take all your treatment for TB to stop the infection coming back or affecting others.

## Will I need to take time off work, school or early childhood centre?

If you have TB disease you may need to spend time in hospital. Once home you must not go to school, work or out in public until you are told it is safe to do so by a Public Health Nurse.

## How is it treated?

TB disease is treated by taking several different antibiotics usually for at least 6 to 9 months. It is very important that you take all your treatment exactly as it is prescribed. If you stop the treatment you may get sick again, and if you do not take the treatment correctly the TB bacteria that are still alive may become resistant to those medicines and more difficult to treat.

If you have TB you will be offered help to quit smoking. While you are on TB medicines you need to stop drinking alcohol to reduce damage to your liver during treatment.

## Where can I get further information?

For further information on TB please contact your doctor or Regional Public Health on (04) 570 9002. You can also phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 at any time of the day or night to speak to a registered nurse. The following websites have information on TB:

<http://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/conditions-and-treatments/diseases-and-illnesses/tuberculosis-disease>

<https://www.cdc.gov/tb/topic/basics/default.htm>