

What is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis or TB is a disease caused by bacteria (germs) called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. TB can affect any part of your body, but usually affects the lungs (pulmonary TB). It can make you very ill if left untreated.

In Western Australia, fewer than 100 people develop TB each year, so the chance of catching TB is small.

How is TB Spread?

Tuberculosis is usually spread by breathing in the bacteria after a person who has untreated lung TB coughs or sneezes. It is not spread by objects, such as cups or plates, the infected person has touched or used. TB in other parts of the body is generally not infectious, but can still be serious. TB is no longer spread from milk in Australia, but you can be infected overseas by drinking unpasteurised milk.

When a healthy person breathes in TB bacteria, the body's immune system usually controls the infection without the person feeling unwell, but some TB bacteria may remain inactive in the body for years. This person has **TB infection** but cannot spread TB to other people. If TB is found and treated at this stage, they will not get **TB disease**.

In a small number of people, TB infection will develop into **TB disease**. This can happen soon after catching TB, or a long time later.

What are the signs and symptoms of TB?

In the early stages of TB disease there may be no symptoms. Later, the most common symptoms include tiredness, fever, night sweats and weight loss, followed by a cough that lasts more than 2 weeks, coughing up blood, and chest pain.

Who is the most at risk of developing TB?

- People living with someone who has TB.
- Migrants and refugees, especially those from developing countries.
- Those who live for long periods in countries where TB is common.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in some parts of Australia.
- People whose immune systems are weakened by diseases such as HIV/AIDS, diabetes, silicosis, or by immunosuppressive therapy.
- People living in residential institutions, including prisons.
- People living in crowded, sub-standard housing or on the streets.

How is TB diagnosed?

Doctors test for TB by looking at symptoms, x-rays, looking for the bacteria in body fluids or tissues, and by the tuberculin (Mantoux) skin test.

How is TB treated?

Most TB can be treated and cured with a course of 3 or 4 antibiotics taken together for about 6 months. It is important that you start straight away, and that you take all the tablets, without forgetting any. Stopping or not taking the antibiotics can cause the disease to return and make it more difficult to cure.

Can TB be prevented?

A vaccine against TB is available, called BCG. It provides good protection in young children, but is not very effective in adults.

In Western Australia, BCG vaccination is only offered to a very small group of people who have a high risk of catching TB. These include:

- Aboriginal babies in regions where TB is more common
- babies or young children living in households which include migrants or visitors from, or who regularly visit, high-risk countries.

TUBERCULOSIS

If you are travelling to a high-risk country you can have a Mantoux test before and after the trip. This will show whether you have been exposed to the TB bacteria. If the test is positive, you may be offered a simple treatment to prevent the development of disease. The treatment is for 6 months and is very effective.

Remember

- TB can be cured if treated early and properly.
- All TB services at the Perth Chest Clinic are free.
- If you have recently arrived in WA after living or working in a high-risk country, you should visit the Perth Chest Clinic for a TB check, or consult your doctor.
- See your doctor if you have a cough that lasts for more than 3 weeks in spite of treatment.

For more information

Contact:

- **Perth Chest Clinic**
17 Murray St, Perth WA 6000
Telephone (08) 9325 3922
Fax (08) 9325 2582
- Your local Population Health unit, community nurse or local hospital (country)
- Your doctor

Additional information about infectious diseases can be accessed through the Department of Health website at:

www.population.health.wa.gov.au



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