

# Tuberculosis

## WHAT IS TUBERCULOSIS?

- Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by infection with the bacteria (germ) *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*.
- TB can damage a person's lungs or other parts of the body and cause serious illness.

## HOW IS IT SPREAD?

- TB is spread through the air when a person with TB in the lungs or throat coughs, sneezes or speaks, sending germs into the air
- When other people breathe in these germs they can become infected
- Most people get TB germs from someone they spend a lot of time with, like a family member or friend
- TB is *NOT* spread by household items (for example by cutlery, crockery, drinking glasses, sheets, clothes or telephone) so it is not necessary to use separate household items.

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TB INFECTION AND TB DISEASE?

**TB Infection:** the TB germs are in the body but they are "**inactive**". In most cases, the body's defences control the germs. However, these germs can stay alive in an **inactive** state.

- While the TB germs are **inactive**, they cannot do any damage, or be spread to other people. The person is "**infected**", but not sick. For most (90 per cent of people) the germs will always be inactive. Infection can be detected by a positive result to a Tuberculin Skin Test.

**TB Disease:** it is possible, even after many years, for **inactive** TB germs to become **active** when the body's defences are weakened. This may be due to ageing, serious illness, stressful event, drug or alcohol misuse, HIV infection (the virus that causes AIDS) or other conditions.

- When inactive TB germs become **active**, TB disease can develop.
- Only about 10 per cent of people who are infected with TB germs will get TB disease.
- People with TB of the lungs or throat *can be infectious* to others.
- In most cases, after two weeks of taking medication, people with TB disease will no longer spread TB germs.
- People with TB in other parts of the body are *not* infectious.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

TB can attack any part of the body, but the lungs are the most common site. People with TB may have some or all of the following symptoms:

- A cough that lasts for more than three weeks
- Fevers
- Unexplained weight loss
- Night sweats
- Always feeling tired
- Loss of appetite
- Blood stained sputum
- Pain and / or swelling in the affected area when TB is outside the lungs.

Some people with active TB disease may have only mild symptoms.

## WHO IS AT RISK?

- People who spend long periods in close contact with a person with infectious TB of the lung or respiratory tract.
- People who:
  - Have cancer, including lymphoma or Hodgkin's disease
  - Take medication that affects the immune system (e.g. corticosteroids, cyclosporin or chemotherapy drugs)
  - Have HIV/AIDS
  - Have a chronic illness that affects their immune system.

## HOW IS IT PREVENTED?

- People with TB in their lungs are instructed to cover their nose and mouth when they cough or sneeze
- People with infectious TB in their lung are isolated until they are no longer infectious
- Some people diagnosed with TB infection are offered a course of preventive treatment
- BCG vaccination gives protection against life-threatening forms of TB to young children who travel to countries where TB is very common. BCG is *not* generally recommended in NSW.

## HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

### *For TB in the lungs:*

- A chest x-ray can show whether TB disease has affected the lungs
- A sputum test shows if TB germs are present in coughed up sputum
- If the person cannot cough up sputum other tests may be needed.

### *For TB outside the lungs:*

- Tests such as a fine needle biopsy, wound swab, surgical specimen or early morning urine sample can assist in diagnosing TB.

## HOW IS IT TREATED?

- **TB Infection:** the doctor may prescribe a course of tablets (preventive therapy) or follow up with regular chest x-rays.
- **TB Disease:** is treated with a combination of special antibiotics for at least six months. A chest clinic nurse will watch you take the TB antibiotics to check for any side effects and make sure treatment is completed.
- People with TB can be cured if they complete treatment.
- People with TB can return to normal activities, while on treatment, as long as they are no longer infectious.
- If people with TB do not take their medication, they can become seriously ill, and may even die.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Contact your local Chest Clinic or see your family doctor.
- All TB investigations and treatment are provided free and confidentially at chest clinics.
- A referral from a doctor is *NOT* needed to attend a chest clinic.
- A Medicare card is *NOT* needed.

Chest Clinic Services include the care and management of patients with TB and all the necessary contact tracing and screening.