

Tuberculosis

Description

A chronic bacterial infection that mainly involves the lungs.

Frequent signs and symptoms

Early stages:

- No symptoms (often).
- Symptoms that resemble those of the flu.

Middle stages:

- Low fever. Weight loss. Chronic fatigue.
- Heavy sweating, especially at night.

Later stages:

- Cough, with sputum that becomes progressively bloody, yellow, thick, or gray.
- Chest pain. Shortness of breath.

Causes

Infection by the germ, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. Germs are transmitted in the air from one person to another. Many persons are infected with TB that is inactive, and there are no symptoms (called latent TB infection). About 1 in 10 of these people will eventually develop active TB.

Risk increases with

- Adults over 60 and newborns and infants.
- Chronic illness that lowers resistance (e.g., AIDS).
- Use of cortisone or drugs that suppress the immune system.
- Crowded or unclean living conditions.
- Alcohol and drug abuse.
- Homelessness.
- Living in, or coming from, third world countries.

Expected outcomes

Usually curable with treatment.

Possible complications

- Lung abscess, bronchiectasis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or respiratory failure.
- Spread of infection to brain, bone, spine, and kidneys.

General Measures

- Medical tests may include TB skin test, blood studies, a sputum study, and chest X-ray.
- Have regular follow-up visits with your health care provider to see if treatment is working.
- To learn more: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), 1600 Clifton Rd., NE, Mailstop E-10, Atlanta, GA 30333; website: www.cdc.gov/nchstp/tb.

Medications

- Antitubercular drugs, usually for 6 to 12 months. Patients are probably not infectious after 10 days to 2 weeks of treatment. MDR-TB may need treatment for up to two years.
- It is important to take the drugs as prescribed to be sure the infection is cured. If people stop the drugs too soon, infection is can still be active and may become resistant to further treatment.
- A TB infection that becomes resistant to drugs is termed *multidrug-resistant TB* (MDR-TB). Stronger TB drugs have to be used which have serious side effects. MDR-TB is more difficult to cure, and it can be fatal.

Activity

- Rest until symptoms improve.

Notify your Doctor if

- You or a family member has symptoms of TB.
- Symptoms persist or worsen, despite treatment.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop.

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