

# What You Should Know About Tuberculosis (TB)?

## Public Health – Factsheet

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### What is Tuberculosis (TB)?

Tuberculosis (TB) is caused by a germ that a person can catch from a person with TB disease.

### What is TB disease?

TB disease is a serious disease that affects mainly the lung, but can also affect other parts of the body such as the brain, kidneys, or the spine. Persons with TB disease are sick and can spread the infection to others.

### What is latent TB Infection?

Latent tuberculosis infection (LTBI), or *sleeping TB*, means the person has the TB germ in his/her body (usually lungs), but is not sick, does not have symptoms and cannot spread the infection. Tuberculosis may last for a lifetime as an infection, never developing into disease.

### How common is TB?

TB is one of the most common infections in the world. It is more common in developing countries than in developed countries like Canada. In Manitoba, there are about 100 new cases of TB disease diagnosed each year.

### How is TB spread?

When a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, sneezes, speaks, or sings, the germs get into the air. These germs can stay in the air for several hours, depending on the environment. Persons who breathe in the air containing these TB germs can become infected. Early and proper treatment prevents TB from spreading to other people.

### Who is at risk for TB?

Anyone who has come into contact with someone who has TB of the lungs or throat is at risk for getting TB infection, which may later develop into TB disease. This is more likely to happen in people with weakened immune systems, for example in persons with HIV infection.

### What are the symptoms of TB disease?

The general symptoms of TB disease include feelings of sickness or weakness, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. The symptoms of TB disease of the lungs include coughing, chest pain, and coughing up of blood. Symptoms of TB disease in other parts of the body depend on the area affected.

### Is there a cure for TB?

TB can almost always be cured with proper medical treatment. Treatment normally lasts for six months and all drugs must be taken as directed by your doctor.

To help take the drugs properly, Manitoba offers a program called “Directly Observed Therapy” (DOT), through which a health worker supervises the taking of medication.

TB can lead to serious lung and other complications, if it is not properly treated.

If a person with TB does not take the required dosage of medicine or stops taking the drugs too soon, the TB bacteria can become resistant to the drugs already taken, which makes the TB disease much more difficult to treat.

### Can TB be prevented?

The best way of preventing TB from spreading is to make sure that everyone with the disease is diagnosed early and treated with the right drugs for six months.

Another way to prevent TB is to detect the infection before it develops into disease. This is done using a skin test. Doctors may prescribe medication to be taken for six to nine months to prevent the initial infection from developing into TB disease.

### What is BCG?

BCG is a TB vaccine that helps to protect babies and young children against the most severe forms of TB disease such as TB meningitis. In Manitoba, only infants in most First Nations communities are routinely vaccinated.

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## What is a community investigation?

When several cases of tuberculosis occur in a community over a period of a few years, a community investigation may take place. This is to make sure that all cases of TB have been identified and to stop the spread of TB in the community.

## Does smoking increase the risk of becoming infected with the TB bacteria?

Yes, if cigarette smokers breathe in TB bacteria, they are up to three times more likely to develop latent (*sleeping*) TB infection than non-smokers. The risk of infection also increases the more you smoke and the longer you have been smoking.

## Does smoking increase the risk of developing TB disease?

For persons with latent (*sleeping*) TB infection, cigarette smoking increases their risk of developing TB disease by two or three times, compared to non-smokers. Smoking also increases the risk of death among TB patients up to six times.

## Where can I go to get more information?

For more information and/or if you have any question, please contact your public health office.