

Tuberculosis

Patient education

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a bacterial infection that is caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and can be contagious if it affects the lungs. There are two types of TB: latent TB infection and active TB disease.

What causes tuberculosis?

TB can be spread from one person to another through aerosols that are released from the lungs or airways of a person with active pulmonary and/or laryngeal TB disease into the air when they cough, talk, or sneeze.

People nearby can breathe in the TB bacteria and become infected; but it is important to note that TB is only spread through close and prolonged contact. TB is not spread by shaking someone's hands, sharing food or drinks, kissing, or touching toilet seats.

What increases the risks?

The risk of being exposed to TB is very low for most Canadians.

However, your risk of getting TB may increase if you:

- Have been around people known or suspected to have active pulmonary and/or laryngeal TB
- Are a smoker
- Use illegal drugs
- Are underweight
- Are a heavy drinker
- Are traveling to countries with high rates of TB
- Work in settings with high rates of TB and/or where you could be exposed to TB, such as homeless shelters, correctional facilities, and long-term care facilities
- Have had TB in the past but did not complete the treatment
- Have certain diseases or conditions, such as HIV or AIDS, diabetes, or silicosis
- Have had certain drug treatments that affect your immune system

How do I know that I have tuberculosis?

Most people who are infected with TB do not develop the disease and are considered to have latent TB infections. People with latent TB infections do not have any symptoms and do not spread the TB bacteria to others. Latent TB infections may progress to active TB disease if it is left untreated.

A small percentage of people infected with TB become sick and are considered to have active TB disease. People with active TB infections can spread the TB bacteria and experience symptoms that include:

- A cough that:
 - Lasts for more than two weeks
 - May make you cough up phlegm (thick liquid that comes from your airways or lungs)
 - May make you cough up blood
- Chest pain
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Weakness
- Fatigue
- Chills
- Night sweats
- Fever

Although TB mainly causes symptoms in the lungs and airways, it can also affect other parts of the body, such as the spine, bones, kidneys, brain, and lymph nodes. If active TB is not treated properly or is left untreated, the disease can be fatal and may lead to death.

Health care providers can determine whether you have TB through a skin test and/or a blood test. If your skin test comes back positive, additional tests, such as chest X-rays or testing of a phlegm sample, may be required to determine whether you have the latent or active form of TB.

How is this treated?

Both latent and active TB can be treated.

Active TB disease can be cured by taking antibiotics prescribed by your health care provider. It is important to take all antibiotics as prescribed to avoid spreading TB to others and to avoid increasing the risk of getting TB again in the future.

If you have been diagnosed with tuberculosis, please contact your doctor or health care provider immediately if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Nausea or vomiting
- Jaundice (yellowing of eyes or skin)
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Dark urine
- Worsening symptoms or symptoms that won't go away with treatment

If you have been diagnosed with tuberculosis, please get help immediately if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath or trouble breathing
- You cough up blood
- You have a headache
- You have a stiff neck

Where can I get more information?

About TB: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/tuberculosis.html>

References:

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2019, March 25). *Tuberculosis: Symptoms and treatment*. Canada.ca. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/tuberculosis.html>

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2019a, March 25). *Tuberculosis: Prevention and risks*. Canada.ca. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/tuberculosis/prevention-risks.html>

Tuberculosis. (2023c, June 23). York Region. <https://www.york.ca/health/infectious-diseases-and-prevention/tuberculosis>

Tuberculosis (TB)- Basic TB Facts. (2019, June 19). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/tb/topic/basics/default.htm>