

Tuberculosis Information

Information Line recording 01.15.04

TB, or tuberculosis, is a disease caused by bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. The bacteria can attack any part of your body, but they usually attack the lungs. TB disease was once the leading cause of death in the United States.

In the 1940s, scientists discovered the first of several drugs now used to treat TB. As a result, TB slowly began to disappear in the United States. But TB has come back. Between 1985 and 1992, the number of TB cases increased. The country became complacent about TB. However, with increased attention to the TB problem, we have had a steady decline in the number of persons with TB. But TB is still a problem; more than 16,000 cases were reported in 2000 in the United States.

TB spreads through the air from one person to another. The bacteria are put into the air when a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs or sneezes. People nearby may breathe in these bacteria and become infected.

When a person breathes in TB bacteria, the bacteria can settle in the lungs and begin to grow. From there, they can move through the blood to other parts of the body, such as the kidney, spine, and brain.

TB in the lungs or throat can be infectious. This means that the bacteria can be spread to other people.

People with TB disease are most likely to spread it to people they spend time with everyday. This includes family members, friends, and coworkers.

In most people who breathe in TB bacteria and become infected, the body is able to fight the bacteria to stop them from growing. The bacteria become inactive, but they remain alive in the body and can become active later. This is called latent TB infection. People with latent TB infection:

- Have no symptoms
- Don't feel sick
- Can't spread TB to others
- Usually have a positive skin test reaction

- Can develop TB disease later in life if they do not receive treatment for latent TB infection

TB bacteria become active if the immune system can't stop them from growing. The active bacteria begin to multiply in the body and cause TB disease. Some people develop TB disease soon after becoming infected, before their immune system can fight the TB bacteria. Other people may get sick later, when their immune system becomes weak for some reason.

Babies and young children often have weak immune systems. People infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, have very weak immune systems. Other people can have weak immune systems, too, especially people with any of these conditions:

- Substance abuse
- Diabetes mellitus
- Silicosis
- Cancer of the head or neck
- Leukemia or Hodgkin's disease
- Severe kidney disease
- Low body weight
- Certain medical treatments (such as corticosteroid treatment or organ transplants)

Symptoms of TB depend on where in the body the TB bacteria are growing. TB bacteria usually grow in the lungs. TB in the lungs may:

- A bad cough that lasts longer than 2 weeks
- Pain in the chest
- Coughing up blood or sputum (phlegm from deep inside the lungs)

Other symptoms of TB disease are:

- Weakness or fatigue
- Weight loss
- No appetite
- Chills
- Fever
- Sweating at night

A TB skin test is the only way to find out if you have latent TB infection. A health care worker can give you the TB skin test. The health care worker will inject a small amount of testing fluid (called tuberculin) just under the skin on the lower part of your arm. After 2 or 3 days, the health care worker will measure your reaction to the test. You may have a small bump where the tuberculin was injected. The health care worker will measure this bump and tell you if your reaction to the test is positive or negative. A positive reaction usually means that you have latent TB infection.

If you have a positive reaction to the skin test, your doctor may do other tests to see if you have TB disease. These tests usually include a chest x-ray and a test of the phlegm you cough up. If you have TB disease, you will need to take medicine to cure the disease.

Links to more information about Tuberculosis can be found at the Broome County website at www.gobroomecounty.com/safety, and go to Tuberculosis Information.