

Tuberculosis Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by germs that spread from person to person through the air. TB usually affects the lungs but can also affect other body parts, such as the brain, kidneys, or spine. A person with TB can die if they do not get treatment.

How is TB spread?

TB germs go into the air when a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, sneezes, speaks, or sings. TB germs are very persistent and stay in the environment for several hours. People who breathe in air containing these TB germs can become infected.

What are the symptoms of TB?

The general symptoms of TB disease may include:

- Weakness or fatigue
- Weight loss
- Fever
- Chills
- Night sweats

The symptoms of TB disease of the lungs may also include:

- A cough lasting three weeks or longer
- Chest pain
- Coughing up blood or phlegm

Is there a difference between TB infection and TB disease?

Yes. People with TB infection have TB germs in their bodies, but they are not sick because the germs are not active. These people do not have symptoms of TB disease, and they cannot spread the germs to others. However, they may develop TB disease in the future, and they are often prescribed treatment to prevent this.

People with TB disease are sick from *active* TB germs, meaning that the TB germs are multiplying and destroying tissue in their bodies. They usually have symptoms of TB disease; however, not all individuals may experience symptoms. People with TB disease of the lungs or throat can spread germs to others. They are prescribed drugs that can treat TB disease.

What does a positive TB test mean?

A person with a positive tuberculin skin test, also known as a TST, or a TB blood test has TB germs in their body. The test does not tell whether the person has TB infection or TB disease. Other tests, such as a chest x-ray, symptom screening, and testing of sputum (phlegm), are needed to determine whether the person has TB infection or TB disease.

Why is TB infection treated?

If you have TB infection but not TB disease, your doctor may want you to take medicine to kill the TB germs and prevent you from developing TB disease. The decision about treating TB infection will be based on your chances of developing TB disease. Some people are more likely than others to develop TB disease once they have a TB infection. This includes people with HIV infection, people who were recently exposed to someone with TB disease, and people with certain medical conditions, including diabetes.

How is TB disease treated?

TB disease can be treated by taking multiple drugs for several months, generally six to nine months, sometimes longer. People who have TB disease must finish the medicine and take the drugs exactly as prescribed. If they stop taking the drugs too soon, they can experience symptoms again and be infectious to others. If they do not take the drugs correctly, the germs that are still alive may become resistant to those drugs. TB that is resistant to drugs is more difficult to treat. Local health department and Public Health Region staff meet regularly with patients who have TB to watch them take their medications. This is called *directly observed therapy (DOT)*. DOT helps the patient complete treatment in the least amount of time.

The Texas Department of State Health Services provides TB medications to public health clinics across Texas. These clinics treat patients with TB disease at no cost to the patient. Also, people who are presumed to have TB may be given treatment while their clinicians perform further testing to confirm or rule out TB disease.

Where can I find more information about TB?

Texas Department of State Health Services

- www.texasstb.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- Overview of Tuberculosis:
<https://www.cdc.gov/tb/about/index.html>
- Talking With Your Health Care Provider About Tuberculosis:
<https://www.cdc.gov/tb/talk-with-provider/>
- What You Need to Know About Tuberculosis Fact Sheet:
<https://www.cdc.gov/tb/communication-resources/tuberculosis-fact-sheet.html>