

Tuberculosis: Answers to Frequent Questions

Tuberculosis, TB, is a unique bacterial infection because a person may have either active TB or dormant TB. Both the active and dormant infections are caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. This bacterial infection is most often in the lungs, but has the potential to spread to other parts of the body. Those with active TB can spread the bacterial infection, while those with dormant TB cannot. The infection is spread through the air as someone who is infected breathes out and another person breathes the bacteria in the air.

Testing for TB is very easy and can be done at virtually any clinic. A simple skin test, referred to as a PPD, can be done where an injection is placed just under the skin on the forearm. Two to three days later the skin needs to be seen by a healthcare professional to decide whether the test is positive or negative. Since dormant TB does not produce symptoms, it is best for everyone to have the skin test done to prevent those with dormant TB from developing active TB. Also individuals who have been exposed to contacts with known active TB should be tested. Those with the symptoms of active TB should be tested right away. The symptoms of active tuberculosis include an ongoing cough with mucus that may be bloody, fatigue, weight loss, and night sweats.

After a person has a positive skin test the next test to have done is a chest x-ray. The x-ray can help determine if someone has active TB or dormant TB. If someone has an ongoing cough with sputum, cultures can be done to determine if the TB is active.

In the state of Alaska if a person has a positive PPD, a questionnaire is filled out and sent with a copy of their chest x-ray. If a person is suspected to have active TB, the results of their sputum culture will also be sent. At that point the State will decide if that person needs to receive medication. The medication is provided by the State and is free of cost to the patient. Active TB can be treated with a combination of antibiotics for at least 6 months. Treatment is extended if further testing shows the person still has active TB. For dormant TB the treatment is one antibiotic for 9 months to suppress the TB and to prevent it from becoming active. These medications must be taken as directed for the 6-9 month duration, otherwise the infection can get worse or even lead to antibiotic resistance. The complications of active TB can be very dangerous, leading to lung and other organ damage. Active TB has the potential to cause death.

Because of the large number of people in rural Alaska with both active and dormant TB, everyone is strongly encouraged to be tested. With this type of infection it is best to treat those with both active and dormant TB to prevent the further spreading of this potentially dangerous infection.

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