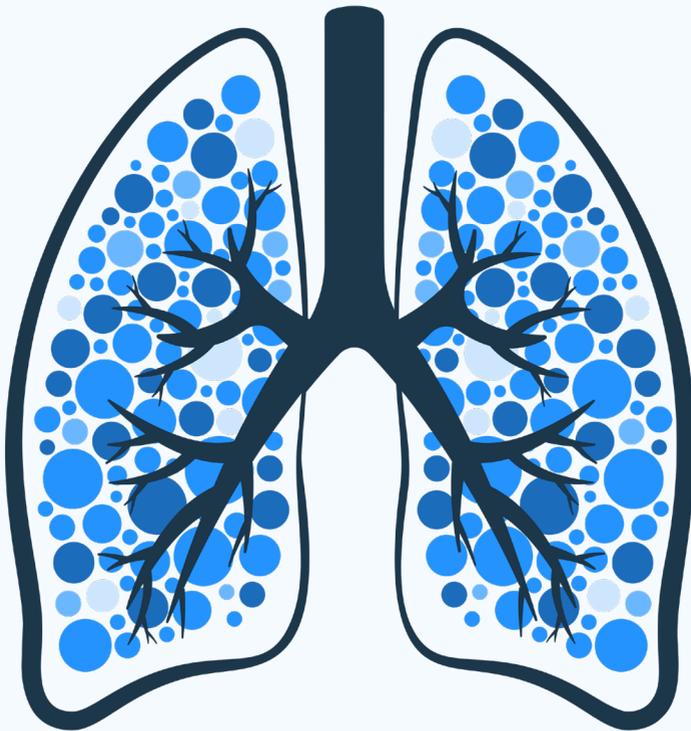


Tuberculosis

The disease, treatment
and prevention



Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease that usually affects the lungs, although it can affect any part of the body.

There are around 5,000 cases of TB a year in the UK with around 60 of these being in Northern Ireland.

TB is not easily caught – you have to be in close and prolonged contact with someone with infectious TB (for example, living in the same household) – but everybody should be aware of the symptoms of the disease so they can seek treatment as soon as possible.

TB is curable with a course of special antibiotics as long as you complete the course.



How is TB spread and am I likely to get infected?

TB can only be caught directly from someone with infectious TB in their lungs or throat. Although TB is spread through the air when people who have the disease cough or sneeze, it takes close and lengthy contact with an infectious person to be at risk of being infected.

Not everyone with TB of the lungs is infectious. As long as they are taking the proper treatment most people that were infectious become non-infectious pretty quickly – generally after about two weeks

While anyone can catch TB, some groups of people are more at risk of developing it than others. These include people who:

- have lived in the same household – or been in prolonged close contact – with someone with infectious TB;
- are living in unhealthy or over-crowded conditions, including those who are homeless or sleeping rough;
- have lived, worked or stayed for a long time in an area with a high rate of TB;
- may have been exposed to TB in their youth when the disease was more common in this country;
- are the children of parents whose country of origin has a high rate of TB;
- have been in prison;
- are unable to fight off infection (immunosuppressed) due to illness (for example HIV infection) or treatment;
- are dependent on drugs or misuse alcohol;
- do not eat enough to stay healthy.

How will I know if I've got TB?

The most common symptoms of TB include:

- a persistent cough that gets progressively worse over several weeks;
- loss of weight for no obvious reason;
- fever and heavy night sweats;
- a general and unusual sense of tiredness and being unwell;
- coughing up blood.

All these may also be signs of other problems. If you have them and are worried, talk to a doctor or nurse at your local surgery or clinic.

If you are a close contact of someone who has been diagnosed with TB and there is a risk you may have the infection, you will be offered a check-up by a specialist team.



Long-term cough



Weight loss



Fever



Night sweats



Fatigue



Blood cough

If I have TB, can I be cured?

Yes, TB can be treated with special antibiotics. Once treatment starts, you should begin to feel better after about two to four weeks but the treatment has to continue for at least six months. It is important to complete the whole course of antibiotics to cure TB. If you don't, the infection may return in a form that is resistant to the usual drugs and much more difficult to treat. And you may pass on this more serious form of the infection to your family and friends. **If TB is not treated properly, it may lead to death.**

How can TB be prevented?

The most important and effective way to prevent TB spreading is to diagnose people with the disease as soon as possible and make sure they have a full course of correct treatment. Contact tracing will identify the close contacts who must also be checked to ensure they haven't got TB as well. Close contacts are people who have prolonged contact with a person with infectious TB, this usually includes people who live together or are in a relationship.

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng33

I thought TB was prevented by a vaccine?

There is a vaccine (BCG) that has been in use for many years to help protect against TB. BCG works best to prevent the more serious forms of TB in children. However, the BCG vaccine does not prevent TB in all cases so you still need to know the signs and symptoms of TB.



Who is offered BCG vaccination?

In the UK, like many other countries, BCG is offered to:

- children under 16 years of age who are more likely than the general population to come into contact with someone with TB, either because they live in an area with high rates of TB or their parents or grandparents came from a country with high rates of TB;
- children under 16 years of age who are tuberculin negative and have been in close contact with someone with infectious TB.

The vaccination is free and is usually offered after the birth either in hospital or when you return home. BCG vaccination is not usually recommended for people aged over 16 years, unless the risk of exposure is great. This may include some healthcare or laboratory workers.

I'm going abroad, do I need a BCG injection?

If you are under 16 years of age and are going to work or live for more than three months in a country with a high incidence of TB, it's important that you are protected from TB. Ask for advice at your doctor's surgery or clinic.

Can I request a BCG vaccination for myself or my children?

Only those individuals who have specific risk factors for TB will be offered a BCG vaccination.

TB - common concerns

Most people living in Northern Ireland will never encounter a person with TB. The risk of developing TB in Northern Ireland is low. Nevertheless, it is important that people are aware of TB symptoms, and know how TB is spread and treated. It is also important that people understand the real risk to themselves and their families.

Public transport and enclosed public places

Using public transport and going about your normal daily business does not put you at increased risk of getting TB.



TB in schools

This is very rare but can cause great anxiety. Children with TB hardly ever spread the disease, either at home or in schools. Children generally catch TB from adults with TB of the lungs. If a child who attends school is diagnosed with TB, their close family and household contacts are screened. The source is usually a close family member or someone from the same household.

A multi-disciplinary team of experts in public health and infectious diseases will perform a specialist risk assessment of the school, considering what type of TB the person has and how infectious they are. In the unusual situation where there is a significant risk of transmission within the school, the Public Health Agency and HSC Trust will work closely with the school to identify any close contacts. Anyone deemed at risk will be asked to undertake testing, and be offered treatment if necessary.

If an adult member of staff was found to have infectious TB then children would be screened following public health advice.

More information

Countries with high rates of TB

Countries with high rates of TB are taken from World Health Organization (WHO) data and can be found online at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/tuberculosis-tb-by-country-rates-per-100000-people/who-estimates-of-tuberculosis-incidence-by-country-and-territory-2020-accessible-text-version

TB Alert

For more information on protecting yourself, your family and friends against TB, you can talk to your doctor or contact TB Alert. TB Alert is a charity dedicated to raising awareness about TB and fighting TB worldwide:

www.tbalert.org

22 Tiverton Road
London
NW10 3HL

Email: contact@tbalert.org

Useful links

www.nidirect.gov.uk/news/important-recognise-tuberculosis-tb-symptoms-early

www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorate-public-health/health-protection/tuberculosis



Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

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