

What is Tuberculosis (TB)?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, which is spread by airborne droplets. The risk of infection depends upon duration of exposure, the intensity of the exposure, and the immune status of the person exposed. The immune system clears the bacteria immediately in more than 80% of people exposed. In a small proportion of people who have been infected, the bacteria are walled off and remain dormant but viable. This is called latent TB. It is estimated that 5-10% of those with latent TB will develop active TB during their lifetime. The most infectious form of TB is pulmonary TB, particularly smear positive cases where TB bacilli can be seen on direct microscopic examination of the sputum. Left untreated, it is estimated that each person with active TB will infect on average between 10 and 15 people each year.

Symptoms:

Any of the following symptoms may suggest TB:

- Fever and night sweats
- Persistent cough
- Losing weight
- Blood in your sputum (phlegm or spit) at any time



Both health professionals and the general public should be aware of the following key facts about TB:

- TB can be fatal if not treated
- TB is usually curable with a six-month course of antibiotics which must be completed
- Not completing the full course can encourage drug resistance
- TB disease develops slowly in the body over a period of several months
- Symptoms are: fever and night sweats, persistent cough, weight loss, blood in your sputum (phlegm or spit) at any time, a lack of appetite, fatigue and a general sense of feeling unwell
- The infection requires prolonged and close contact in order to spread from person to person

- Under half of cases in the UK have the infectious form of the disease
- Most cases present little or no risk to others
- It is very uncommon to catch TB from a child with the disease
- TB treatment is free for patients in the UK

TB today remains an important public health problem throughout much of the world, causing the deaths of more than a million people each year, mostly in developing countries. With effective treatment, TB can be a curable disease.

Key resources:

For general public

[TB: the disease, its treatment and prevention](#)

[BCG and your baby: protecting your baby against TB](#)

[Health matters: what you need to know - Tuberculosis \(TB\)](#)

The truth about TB - <http://www.thetruthabouttb.org/>

TB Alert - [Patient leaflets](#)

For health professionals

[Enhanced surveillance of TB](#)

[General information on TB.pdf](#)

Public Health England - [Tuberculosis \(TB\)](#)

NICE TB guidance - <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng33>

TB Alert is the UK's national tuberculosis charity - <http://www.tbalert.org/>

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