



# Atlantic County Division of Public Health

## *Questions and Answers about Tuberculosis*

### **What is tuberculosis?**

TB is a disease that can damage a person's lungs or other parts of the body and can cause serious illness.

### **How is TB spread?**

TB is spread when people who have active, untreated TB germs in their lungs or throat cough or sneeze, sending their germs into the air. People who breathe these germs into their lungs can become infected.

People who breathe in TB germs usually have had very close, day-to-day contact with someone who has the disease. That's why most people get TB germs from someone they spend a lot of time with, like a family member, friend, or close co-worker.

You're not likely to get TB from someone coughing in the subway or at a restaurant. TB is not spread by sharing dishes, utensils, sheets, or clothing.

### **What does it mean to have latent TB infection?**

Latent TB infection means that the TB germs are in the body but are not active.

When a person inhales TB germs, in most cases, body defenses control the germs by building a wall around them the way a scab forms over a cut. The germs can stay inside these walls for years, alive but not active. While TB germs are not active, they can't do damage, and they can't spread to other people. This person is infected, but NOT sick. He or she probably won't even know that he or she is infected.

Millions of Americans have latent TB infection. For most of them, the germs will never become active.

### **What is TB disease?**

Tuberculosis disease is a serious illness caused by active TB germs.

It is possible to get TB disease shortly after the germs enter the body if body defenses are weak. It is also possible, even after many years, for inactive TB germs to become active when body defenses are weakened. This may be the result of aging, a serious illness, drug or alcohol abuse, or HIV infection.

When defenses are weakened and inactive TB germs become active, the germs can then break out of the walls, begin multiplying, and damage the lungs or other organs. If people with TB disease do not take their medication, they can become seriously ill, and may even die. But people with TB can be cured, if they have proper medical treatment and take their medication as prescribed.



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### **What is drug-resistant TB?**

There are times when TB germs are "resistant" to one or more of the TB medicines most often prescribed by doctors. This means that the medicines are not able to kill the TB germs. When this happens, combinations of other TB medicines are given to the patient. Drug-resistant TB can take longer to cure than regular TB, but most patients can be cured.

Drug-resistant TB can develop if people with active TB take their medicine incorrectly, or if they have not been given the right TB medicines. A person with untreated drug-resistant TB of the lungs or throat can spread drug-resistant germs to other people.

### **What are the signs of TB?**

TB can attack any part of the body, but the lungs are the most common target. People with tuberculosis disease may have some or all of the following symptoms:

- A cough that last a long time
- Fevers
- Constant tiredness
- Weight loss
- Night sweats
- Loss of appetite
- Coughing up blood (occasionally)

People with active TB disease may have only mild symptoms. They may be spreading their germs to others without even knowing that they have TB.

### **What are the tests for TB?**

1. The tuberculin Mantoux skin test shows if a person has been infected.
2. A chest x-ray is given if the Mantoux skin test shows that a person has been infected. The x-ray shows if any damage has been done to the lungs.
3. A sputum test shows if there are TB germs in a person's lungs. Sputum is phlegm from deep inside the lungs.

### **Who should get tested for TB?**

- People who have symptoms of TB
- People who have had close day-to-day contact with someone who has active TB disease (a family member, friend, or co-worker)
- People who have HIV infection, lowered immunity, or certain medical conditions
- People who are required to be tested for employment or school



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### **Can TB patients infect other people?**

Usually, after a week or more of taking effective medication, most patients with TB disease will stop spreading germs. A doctor will test the patient and then decide when the patient is no longer contagious. Most TB patients live at home and can continue their normal activities as long as they are taking the TB medicine.

### **How can we fight TB?**

The best way to fight TB is to make sure that people who need medicine take it regularly. They include:

- People who are sick with TB. These people have active germs and can infect others. The **ONLY** way people with TB disease get well is to take medicine as directed.
- People who are infected but are not yet sick. These people have inactive germs that are walled off. These people may not be sick now, but the TB germs can become active later on in life and make them sick. Taking medicine for treatment of latent TB infection for several months, as prescribed by the doctor, is the best way to get rid of TB germs and prevent illness. However, in some instances, medicine for treatment of latent TB infection may not be prescribed to some people because of certain medical conditions or other factors.
- People who are close contacts to people with active TB disease, regardless of age. These people should take medicine to prevent TB as directed by the doctor.

For more information, call the Atlantic County Division of Public Health at 609-645-5935.

*Information compiled from the New York Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.*