



National Public Health Service for Wales

Gwasanaeth Iechyd Cyhoeddus
Cenedlaethol Cymru

What is TB?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infection caused by a germ (bacteria). TB is usually found in the lungs but any part of the body can be affected. TB occurs in all countries and at all ages, and Wales is no exception.

TB is treatable with a combination of antibiotics and can be completely cured.

How does somebody catch TB?

Anyone can catch TB by breathing in the bacteria in tiny droplets sneezed or coughed out by someone who has TB in their lungs. Unless you live with somebody with active TB, it is *unlikely* that you will catch it. Even if you do live with somebody with active TB, it is still very difficult to catch it.

For these reasons, we are screening only those people who shared a room with the person with TB for prolonged periods on a daily basis. In most people, the body's immune system kills the bacteria very early, preventing infection. Some may develop TB after a few weeks or months. Unlike many years ago, TB is no longer passed on in cow's milk in this country.

In most people, the body's immune system kills the bacteria before they start to cause symptoms and the person does not get ill. A few people become ill with TB within a few weeks or months. A few people have no illness but the germ remains *dormant* in the body and can become *re-activated* many years later, if, for example, the person's immune system (resistance) gets weakened for any reason.

What are the symptoms of TB?

TB can affect any part of the body but is most commonly found in the lungs. The most common symptom is a persistent cough for more than two weeks, with sputum (spit); this can sometimes be blood-stained. Other symptoms include: loss of weight, a poor appetite, fever (high temperature), sweating (particularly noticeable at night). If TB is present elsewhere in the body, glands may be noticed in the neck or pain and swelling in one of the joints. If you have any of these symptoms it does not mean you have TB but it is recommended that you see your GP.

Can somebody with TB infect others?

TB can only be passed on by breathing in the germs spread by someone else, so you cannot catch it from touching somebody or sharing dishes or cutlery. TB is quite difficult to catch. Infecting other people with TB depends on a number of things. If the person with TB has the infection anywhere in the body other than in the lungs then they cannot pass it on (they are

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classed as “non-infectious”). If it is in the lungs it must also be in the sputum (spit) in order for them to pass it on, and they must have a cough to be able to spread the bacteria. People who live in the same house as someone with “active” TB, people who visit very often, or are in the close company of the person often (every day) are most at risk because they are exposed to the germs more often and for prolonged periods (they are often referred to as “close contacts”). These people may need to be tested to see if they have become infected. This is why we are screening those who shared a room for prolonged periods with the person with TB.

They will need to have a skin test (Mantoux) which tells the doctor/nurse if they have been exposed to the TB germ at all. The Mantoux test is a small injection under the skin of the forearm, which is read 2 to 3 days later. If the reaction is very marked with a lot of redness and swelling, an additional blood test and / or a chest X-ray will be done.

Many people will have had a BCG vaccination against TB, either soon after they were born or between the ages of 12 and 15. This gives good (but not complete) protection against the disease. Occasionally, people that have been exposed to TB (but may be entirely well) will be given a course of anti-TB medication to prevent them from developing TB later in life (this is called chemoprophylaxis).

Who has TB?

We do not discuss individual cases for reason of patient confidentiality. Anyone who has been diagnosed with TB in the lungs would be advised to have as little contact with others until they are non-infectious. This takes about 2 weeks, after which they will not be infectious even though they will still be on treatment for 6 months.

For further information see www.nphs.wales.nhs.uk

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