



COUNTY HEALTH MATTERS

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Know the facts about Tuberculosis

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Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by bacteria that can attack any part of your body. TB bacteria usually attack the lungs. The bacteria are spread through the air from one person to another when a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs or sneezes. People nearby may breathe in these bacteria and become infected.

People with good immune systems are able to fight the bacteria and stop them from growing, thereby causing the bacteria to become inactive. When this happens it is called "Latent TB Infection". Many people who have latent TB infection never develop active tuberculosis disease. The bacteria can remain inactive for a lifetime and never cause illness and is not contagious.

People with lesser immune systems or conditions that weaken the immune system are more at risk to develop disease. Some people may get sick later in life, when their immune system becomes weak for some reason. Tuberculosis disease happens when the immune system cannot stop the bacteria from becoming active and multiplying. The disease is contagious and can make a person very sick.

Symptoms of TB disease depend on where in the body the bacteria are growing. TB in the lungs may cause a bad cough that lasts longer than 2 weeks, pain in the chest, coughing up blood or phlegm from deep inside the lungs, weakness or fatigue, weight loss, no appetite, chills, fever, and night sweats.

BCG is a vaccine for TB disease. It is used in many countries, but is not generally recommended in the United States because of the low risk of infection, the effectiveness of the vaccine, and the vaccine's interference with the TB skin test.

A tuberculosis skin test can be done to find out if you have latent TB infection. If you have a positive reaction to a skin test you may have latent TB infection, which does not necessarily mean you have active TB disease. Since many people can have a positive skin test without ever developing active TB disease, it is important for further testing to be done by a physician.

A positive skin test usually means that you have come into contact with a person who has TB disease. Some people are more likely to be exposed than others and should be tested at least one time. Reasons to get tested include spending time with a person with known or suspected TB disease, using IV drugs, working or living in environments such as homeless shelters, migrant farm camps, prisons and jails, some nursing homes, or if you are from a country where the disease is common. Persons with HIV

infection or other conditions that may put them at risk should also be tested. Healthcare workers and daycare workers are usually tested regularly.

The first time you have a positive reaction to skin testing the doctor will do a chest x-ray and possibly some other tests to determine if the TB bacteria are active. If you have latent TB infection the doctor will then determine if you need preventive medication to ensure that the inactive bacteria don't become active later in life. Once a person has a positive skin test they will always have a positive skin test, even after preventive medication. Unless you have TB disease you are not contagious. People who have latent TB infection need to know the symptoms of TB disease. If they develop symptoms later in life, they should contact a physician immediately.

More information regarding Tuberculosis can be found at the following website: www.cdc.gov, or by calling the American Lung Association at 1-800-467-LUNG. The Warren County Health Department offers Tuberculosis testing by appointment only. You may contact our office at 636-456-7474.