Tuberculosis

TB is a bacterial infection of the lungs. It spreads mainly by coughing. If you are exposed to someone who is infected with TB, your lungs can become infected. You will have very few, if any, symptoms at first. After several months a spot may be seen on a chest x-ray. A TB skin test will also turn positive. **A large number of people who have early TB heal themselves completely. There may be no serious illness or further spread for years**.

TB bacteria may lie dormant for many years and then reactivate and cause pneumonia, especially if your immune system is weakened. **Aging, alcohol or drug abuse, cancer chemotherapy or AIDS all increase the risk for reactivation of TB**. The symptoms of active TB of the lung include fever, cough, night sweats, weight loss, and fatigue. TB can spread from the lung to other organs including bone, kidney, and lymph glands.

The diagnosis of TB may be suspected from a chest x-ray. Sputum tests and cultures are usually needed to confirm the diagnosis. Culture tests may take up to 6 weeks to complete. The TB skin test is usually done after a suspected exposure. **TB skin testing takes 2 days to complete**. A red, raised, firm area is a positive test. If you are actively infected with TB, treatment with a combination of 3-4 antibiotics is usually started immediately. Improvement may be slow. It may take up to 2-3 weeks before you are no longer contagious. It is important to eat a good diet and avoid alcohol, tobacco, and recreational drugs. Your County Health Department may be able to monitor your treatment. Adherence is critical.

Treatment for 6-12 months is usually necessary to completely rid your body of TB bacteria. Members of a household who have been exposed to active TB will need to be checked with skin tests and possibly have a chest x-ray. **Preventive treatment is often given to patients whose skin tests turn positive when there is no other sign of TB.** Call your caregiver or the health department for further information about treating TB.

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