

FAQs

Q: What is TB?

A: Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by a bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. The bacteria can infect any part of the body, but most of the time it affects the lungs.

Q: How is TB transmitted?

A: TB bacteria are expelled into the air when a person who has TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, sneezes, speaks or sings. These bacteria can remain in the air for several hours, depending on the environment.

TB is NOT spread by

- Shaking someone's hand
- Sharing food or drink
- Touching bed linens or toilet seats
- Sharing toothbrushes
- Kissing
- Touching someone who has TB

Q: What is latent TB infection (LTBI)?

A: Not everyone infected with TB bacteria become sick. As a result, two TB-related conditions exist: latent TB infection and TB disease. Latent TB infection occurs when TB bacteria live in the body without causing sickness. This is because the body is able to fight the bacteria to stop them from growing.

People with latent TB infection (LTBI):

- Have no symptoms
- Don't feel sickness
- Can't spread TB bacteria to others
- Usually have a positive TB skin test reaction or positive TB blood test
- May develop TB disease if they do not receive treatment for latent TB infection

However, if latent TB bacteria become active in the body and multiply, the person becomes sick with TB disease. For this reason, people with LTBI should be treated to prevent them from developing TB disease.

About 10% of the people who have latent TB infection will develop active disease at some time in their life.

Q: What is TB disease?

A: TB bacteria become active when the immune system is unable to stop the bacteria from growing. When TB bacteria are active (multiplying in your body), this is called TB disease. People with TB disease:

- Are sick
- They may be able to spread the disease to others
- TB disease can develop soon after infection or years later when their immune system becomes weak for another reason

Q: What are the symptoms of TB disease:

A: Symptoms of TB disease include

- A bad cough that lasts three weeks or longer
- Pain in the chest

- Coughing up blood or sputum
- Weakness or fatigue
- Weight loss
- Chills
- Fever
- Sweating at night

Q: What are the tests for TB infection?

A: There are two types of tests for TB infection: the TB blood test and the TB skin test. The Vanderburgh County Health Department is conducting TB blood tests.

TB Blood Test: uses a blood sample to find out if you are infected with TB bacteria.

This is done either by the health department or at your doctor's office. Your blood is sent to a laboratory for analysis and results. Only one visit is required to draw blood for the test.

A positive TB blood test means that you have been infected with TB bacteria. Additional tests are then indicated to see if you have TB disease. These tests include a chest Xray. They may also include a test of sputum you cough up. Because TB bacteria can be found in other places in your body other than your lungs, your provider may check urine, obtain other tissues samples, or do other tests. Without treatment, latent TB infection can progress to TB disease. These additional tests and a complete physical examination help to determine whether you have latent TB infection (that is you are not sick or infectious) or have TB disease (are sick). If you have latent TB infection, you should be treated to prevent the development of TB disease. If you have TB disease, you will need to take medicine to treat the disease.

Q: Is TB fatal?

A: If not treated properly, TB disease can be fatal.

Some people develop TB disease soon (within weeks) after becoming infected, before their immune system can fight the TB bacteria. Other people become sick years later, when their immune system becomes weak for another reason. Many people with TB infection never develop TB disease.

Q: What is the definition of a close contact?

A: Close contacts are defined by the CDC as individuals with at least 15 hours of contact per week. This includes those living in the same household or frequent visitors to the house; it may also include contacts at work or school who shared indoor airspace with a patient with pulmonary TB disease for more than 15 hours per week during 1 or more weeks or a total of more than 180 hours during a defined infectious period.

Casual contacts are defined by the CDC as individuals with less than 4 hours of contact per week. This may include health care workers and/or contacts at work or school.

Q: Are some people more at risk than others for TB?

A: Yes. Persons who have been recently infected with TB bacteria or persons with medical conditions that weaken the immune system are more at risk. This includes children and adolescents, who may be more likely to progress from latent TB infection to TB disease.

Those at higher risk for TB include:

- People with HIV infection
- People who became infected with TB bacteria in the last 2 years
- Babies and young children
- People who inject illegal drugs
- People who are sick with other diseases that weaken the immune system
- Elderly people
- People who did not receive the correct treatment for TB in the past

Q: Is special cleaning required?

A: Routine cleaning and disinfection practices are sufficient.

Q: Should close contacts be quarantined?

A: Quarantine is a disease control measure that applies to individuals who have been exposed to a communicable disease but are not yet ill. Individuals who are latently infected with TB pose no risk for transmission of the bacteria, therefore quarantine is not appropriate disease control measure in this case.

Isolation is the separation of ill persons who have a communicable disease from those who are healthy and restriction of their movement to stop the spread of that disease or illness. Public health officials generally may isolate individuals with TB disease if they pose a risk to the public's health. After an individual with TB disease has taken medicines for 2-3 weeks, the individual with TB disease can no longer transmit bacteria to others. Your provider will tell you when you can return to work or school or visit with friends.

Q: What should parents do if they think their child has been exposed?

A: Parents who suspect that they or their child have been in close contact for extended periods of time should reach out to the Vanderburgh County Health Department or their local health department if outside Vanderburgh County, for testing.

Q: Since this has been a bad influenza/RSV/COVID season, are you afraid that TB could be the next illness to arise?

A: Although TB is spread in a similar way to a cold or the flu, it is not as contagious. You would have to spend prolonged periods (around 15 hours of contact per week) in close contact with an infected person to catch the infection yourself.