

Medical guidance notes and information

Tuberculosis (TB)

General Facts

- TB is not a highly infectious disease.
- Only a minority of those with TB are infectious.
- Those who are potentially infectious can be identified. They are classified as sputum smear positive. They are investigated thoroughly by the Specialist for Communicable Diseases.
- TB is a treatable disease.
- The majority of people have been vaccinated and protected against TB in childhood.

Infectivity

Human tuberculosis is caused by infection with mycobacterium tuberculosis or mycobacterium bovis. TB in 75% of cases affects lungs but could also affect any other system. The infection is usually acquired by respiratory spread so the lung cases would be most infectious. Transmission is only likely when the carrier is sputum smear positive for TB bacillus.

If the person has pulmonary (or respiratory) TB and they are not sputum smear positive for TB then they would not present a risk to others around them.

In order for the infection to be passed on from one person to another, two requirements have to be satisfied.

1. There must be contact with a sputum smear positive individual.
2. That contact must be "close contact" which is usually encountered in families or at home.

Contacts at Work

1. Close contact as described above is unlikely at work.
2. A person who is smear positive on TB is unlikely to be at work.
3. People who are diagnosed with TB but are not sputum smear positive are not infectious and if feeling well they would normally be allowed back to work. They are not a source of infection and therefore contact with them is not dangerous.

The disease is only contagious in a close, direct contact. Therefore even if you have been in contact with a person with TB (smear positive or smear negative) you wouldn't be able to pass the disease to someone else. You could only pass your own disease to someone else.

Prevention

Tuberculosis is usually acquired by respiratory spread. That would mean that bacillus would be present in droplets in the air.

G1222 A1 10/10/2011

Medical guidance notes and information

- Personal hygiene and regular hand washing before eating is the most important method of prevention. Also one should exercise caution when handling dirty tissues and discarded handkerchiefs.
- The majority of people have been vaccinated against tuberculosis. Vaccination usually results in a lifelong immunity.
- If you have been vaccinated and you have a “good” scar then you are not likely to be susceptible to tuberculosis. Please note that the people most at risk of acquiring tuberculosis in contact with TB patients would be people who have immunity deficiency resulting from treatment of malignant disease (chemotherapy; radiotherapy), splenectomy or people who are HIV positive.

Post Incident Procedure

If you are concerned that you have been in contact (close) with a person who has active tuberculosis, make sure that you:

- Wash your hands and face especially before eating.
- Check your immunity with your GP.

Multi Drug Resistant TB (MDR - TB)

This occurs when the TB germ becomes resistant to the 2 antibiotics most commonly used to treat it. This can occur if a person does not take their treatment properly or it may be resistant from the start of the infection making it more difficult to treat. There are medicines available to treat MDR TB but the course is longer (minimum 18 months) and there can be more side effects. The individual may be infectious for longer, the TB Doctor/Nurse will tell you when you are no longer infectious.

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