# Contact tracing for tuberculosis (TB)

## What is contact tracing?

Contact tracing for tuberculosis (TB) involves a check-up to see if you've been infected or have signs of TB disease after being in close contact with someone with infectious TB. This check-up is important so you can get the right advice or treatment if needed, and it helps to prevent the spread of TB by treating people early.

## What is TB?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a serious condition caused by airborne bacteria. Anyone can be affected.

If you breathe in TB bacteria, one of three things will happen:

- your body kills off the bacteria
- the TB bacteria make you ill – this is called 'TB disease'
- the TB bacteria remain in your body without causing harm – this is called 'TB infection'

**TB disease**, also known as active TB, makes you feel increasingly ill and could be passed on to others.

**TB infection**, also known as latent TB, does not cause symptoms, and cannot be passed to others. There's a 1 in 10 chance that a TB infection will become TB disease in your life, especially if your immune system weakens.

## What to do if you've been exposed

If you've been in close contact with someone who has infectious TB, your local health service should contact you to arrange a check-up appointment. If you are concerned and haven't been contacted, you can call your local chest clinic or GP. An appointment will be arranged for you if it's considered necessary.

There is no reason to stop your daily activities, like going to work or school, unless you have a cough that has lasted for three weeks or more or if you feel unwell. If it is strongly suspected that you have infectious TB, you will be given expert advice. The risk of developing a TB infection or disease from contact is small, and the chance of having TB that can be passed on to other people is even smaller.

## Symptoms of TB disease

It is worth knowing the symptoms of TB disease so you can take action quickly if you develop any. Common symptoms can include a cough, fever, night sweats, weight loss, loss of appetite and tiredness.

## About the check up

A check-up for TB is done to find out if you have any symptoms of the disease, if you have been infected but haven't developed symptoms, or if you've had the BCG vaccine. Your doctor might recommend one or more tests, such as a TB skin test, a blood test, or a chest x-ray, to see if you've been in contact with TB bacteria. If these initial tests are positive, further diagnostic tests may be offered.

**Additional tests can include:**

- **Sputum test:** A sample of phlegm from your lungs or throat is checked for TB bacteria. TB found in the lungs (pulmonary TB) is the only infectious form of the illness.
- **Culture test:** A sample of your sputum, tissue, or fluid is sent to a lab to see if it contains TB bacteria. This is a very reliable test, but results can take up to eight weeks.
- **Scans (CT, MRI, ultrasound):** These identify damage to your body that might be caused by TB bacteria.

The results of these tests will help determine the best advice or treatment for you. Different people in the same family or group may not be treated in the same way.

## About TB treatment

Both TB disease and TB infection can be treated with a course of medicine.

**TB disease:** treatment typically takes at least six months and involves taking four antibiotics.

**TB infection:** treatment for a TB infection helps prevent TB disease developing, it is often shorter and involves fewer antibiotics than treatment for TB disease.

## Taking your TB treatment

Take your medicine regularly and complete the full course. If you stop taking your medication before the course is finished, it could make your illness worse, cause your TB to become resistant to the medication, or increase the risk that you might pass TB to others.

## Information and support

**TB Alert:** for any questions or concerns about TB, visit **www.thetruthabouttb.org**, email **contact@tbalert.org** or call 0330 102 2403. This number is low cost or free to call by mobile phone, depending on your contract.

**NHS:** information about tuberculosis (TB), including symptoms, when to get medical help, treatments and causes: **www.nhs.uk**