Everything you need to know about tuberculosis (TB)

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 before they can cause harm
- the TB bacteria make you ill – this is called 'active TB disease'
- the TB bacteria remain in your body without causing harm – this is called 'latent TB infection'

Active TB disease most commonly affects the lungs (pulmonary TB), but it can appear in almost any part of the body (extra-pulmonary TB). TB in the lungs or throat is infectious to others. If you have active TB disease – which you may hear called active TB or just TB for short – you will feel increasingly ill and could pass it on to others.

Common symptoms

- cough
- fever
- night sweats
- weight loss
- loss of appetite
- tiredness

TB disease symptoms

Common symptoms can include a cough, fever, night sweats, weight loss, loss of appetite and tiredness.

TB disease can also cause pain and swelling in the affected area of the body. Sometimes, these symptoms can seem similar to other health problems. If you've had any of these for three weeks or more, it's important to see a doctor as soon as possible. TB disease is treatable with antibiotics, so early treatment can help you recover quickly.

Latent TB infection

If you have latent TB infection – which is often called 'latent TB' or 'TB infection' for short – you will not feel ill with any symptoms and you cannot pass TB on to others. This is because your immune system is keeping the bacteria under control. However, there's a chance you could become ill with active TB disease at any time, especially if your immune system becomes weaker or stressed. Antibiotic treatment can help prevent this. A TB infection has a 1 in 10 chance of becoming active TB disease in your lifetime if left untreated.

Am I at risk from TB?

You may be more at risk from TB if you:

- have links to a country where TB is common
- know someone who has, or has had, TB
- have a health condition or lifestyle that weakens your immune system
- live in crowded or poorly ventilated accommodation
- work in a health or social care setting

Even if you have had the BCG vaccination you can still develop TB disease – the BCG is not 100% effective.



TB diagnosis

If you have any symptoms of TB or you are concerned about TB infection, contact your GP for an appointment. Your doctor will ask about your health and any symptoms you're experiencing. They might also recommend some tests to find out more, which can include:

- **TB skin test or blood test:** these help to find out if you have ever been in contact with TB bacteria

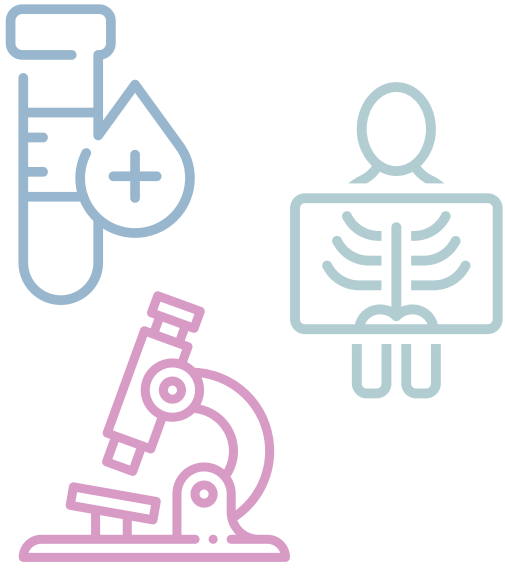
- **Chest x-ray:** this checks your lungs for signs of TB

If these initial tests show a positive result, further diagnostic tests will be offered to find out more. These may include:

- **Sputum test:** a sample of sputum (phlegm) from your lungs or throat is examined for TB bacteria. TB found here (pulmonary TB) is the only infectious form of the illness. Sometimes the test results are unclear, and an additional test called a culture test may also be needed for a more accurate result.

- **Culture test:** a sample of your sputum, tissue, or fluid is sent to a lab to see if it contains TB bacteria. This test is very reliable, though results may take up to eight weeks for a result.

- **CT, MRI, or ultrasound scans:** these scans identify damage to your body that may be caused by TB bacteria.



About TB treatment

Active TB disease: treatment typically takes at least six months and involves taking four antibiotics – rifampicin, isoniazid, pyrazinamide, and ethambutol. These medicines may be given as individual pills or as combination tablets such as Voractiv (all four drugs), Rifater (rifampicin, isoniazid, and pyrazinamide), or Rifinah (rifampicin and isoniazid).

Latent TB infection: treatment for latent TB infection is often shorter and involves fewer antibiotics than treatment for active 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.

Tips for taking TB treatment

- take your tablets at the same time every day
- always keep your tablets in the same place
- use a weekly pill organiser (a dosette box) ask your pharmacist for details
- set an alarm to remind you to take your tablets
- ask a family member or friend to remind you to take your tablets every day
- try to take your TB medicine at least one hour before you eat food or two hours afterwards
- you can eat anything you like, but you should avoid drinking alcohol

If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. However, if it is nearly time for your next dose skip the missed one. Never take a double dose.

Remember, your TB doctor or nurse is there to help you.

How to take your medication:	Rifampicin	Isoniazid	Pyrazinamide	Ethambutol	Voractiv	Rifater	Rifinah
Best absorbed if the stomach is empty take at least one hour before you eat food or two hours afterwards	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Can be taken with or without food			✓	✓			

Treatment side effects

As with all medicines TB treatment can have side effects. Most are mild and resolve in time, though speak to your TB Nurse or a pharmacist if these are bothering you as help is often available.

Tell your doctor about any other medication you are taking, including hormonal contraceptives, as these can affect your TB treatment. It's also best to avoid alcohol during treatment because the drugs put extra strain on your liver.

Sometimes side effects can be more serious. Though rare, the medication can cause jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes) or affect your vision. If you notice any of these changes, stop taking your TB tablets and speak to a doctor or nurse immediately so they can help you manage them.

Common side effects:	Rifampicin	Isoniazid	Pyrazinamide	Ethambutol	Voractiv	Rifater	Rifinah
Nausea (feeling sick), vomiting and diarrhoea	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Flu-like symptoms such as chills, fever, dizziness and joint pain	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Rashes and itchiness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tingling or numbness		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Orange staining to tears, saliva, urine and other bodily fluids - this is not harmful but it may stain contact lenses	✓				✓	✓	✓
Menstrual disturbances	✓				✓	✓	✓
Effectiveness of hormonal contraceptives (oral pill, implants or other) is reduced	✓				✓	✓	✓

Information and support

TB Alert information service: for any questions or concerns about TB, 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.

Peer support: talk to others who have been through TB online at: **healthunlocked.com/tb-alert**

Or email **contact@tbalert.org** to arrange direct support.