Tuberculosis – (TB) contact tracing and screening

Information for relatives and/or carers

This leaflet tells you about contact tracing and screening of patients who may have been in contact with tuberculosis (TB).

It explains:

- the symptoms of TB.
- how TB is caught.
- screening (tests) to check if you have been infected.
- how it can be treated.

What is TB?

TB is an infection caused by a germ called Mycobacterium tuberculosis. It most commonly affects the lungs.

How can TB be caught?

TB can be caught by breathing in air from around people who have the infection. This can happen anywhere, by just being near people, for example, on a bus, in a shop or being in a crowd.

If any TB germs are breathed in, the germs are usually destroyed by your body's immune system (the body's protection against infections) and cause no problems. Some people have TB and are not aware they have the infection. They may not develop any symptoms until a few months after coming into contact with the germ.

Sometimes TB does not cause illness straight away but remains dormant (inactive) in the body.

However, it can develop many years later if the body is weakened by other medical problems. People most at risk are those with damaged immune systems.

Can TB be cured?

TB can be cured with treatment.
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Can TB be prevented?

In the past all children had a vaccination (an injection to protect against a disease) against TB, called the Bacillus Calmette Guérin, either in the first few weeks after birth, or around the age of 12. This vaccination is now only given to people who are at increased risk of getting TB. BCG vaccination does not give complete protection against TB, but it does help the body’s defences to fight it off. The vaccination lasts at least 15 years but you can only have it once.

What are the symptoms?

TB can affect any part of the body, but most commonly affects the lungs or lymph glands (lymph glands develop cells to help your body to fight off infections).

A cough is the most common symptom and you may cough up sputum (phlegm) which can be bloodstained. You may also have some chest pain, loss of appetite and weight, and a fever with sweating, particularly at night. If you have some or all of these symptoms it does not mean you have TB; they can also be the symptoms of many other illnesses.

TB is usually diagnosed after a chest x-ray has been taken and a sample of sputum examined in a laboratory. When TB affects the lymph glands these may appear as lumps in the neck.

How will I know if I might have been in contact with someone with TB?

As soon as someone is diagnosed with TB a process called contact tracing begins. All people who might have been in contact with an infected person will be contacted and may be asked to attend a clinic to be screened (checked).

What can be done to see if I have caught TB?

At the screening clinic a nurse will explain about TB and answer any questions or concerns you may have. He or she will also ask you questions about your health and may arrange for you to have some tests.

A skin test (called Mantoux Test) may be performed. When the result of your skin test is known the nurse will assess (check) your risk of developing TB and you may be offered a BCG vaccination. A sample of your blood may be taken to see if you need treatment.

Other tests may include a chest x-ray. If you have TB your chest x-ray will show early signs of the disease even if you have no symptoms.

After your screening appointment, if you are worried about any symptoms, you should see your GP as soon as possible.
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How long will it take to get the results of my tests?

The results of your tests will be sent to you by post about 2 - 3 weeks after your appointments. A copy of your results will also be sent to your GP.

What if I have TB?

You will be given treatment, usually a long course of antibiotic tablets, and will be asked to attend outpatient clinics until your infection is cured. People in the same household as you and in some cases people you have spent a lot of time with, will be offered a health check-up, but only rarely will they be found to be ill with TB. Usually they will not need any treatment but they may be advised to have further check-ups. Sometimes a simpler course of anti-TB medication is given to people who appear well but are at increased risk of becoming ill with TB in the future.

Contact numbers

If you have any worries or concerns you should contact your GP during normal surgery hours. Outside surgery hours, you should contact your GP’s surgery for the Out of Hours Service number.

North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust

Infection Prevention and Control Team
telephone: 01642 383280
Monday - Friday, 9.00am - 5.00pm

Further information is available from:

NHS Choices
telephone: 111 (when it is less urgent than 999)
Calls to this number are free from landlines and mobile phones 3 or via the website at www.nhs.uk

Information used in the development of this leaflet

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence."Tuberculosis" NICE guideline NG33 published January 2016
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This leaflet has been produced in partnership with patients and carers. All patient leaflets are regularly reviewed, and any suggestions you have as to how it may be improved are extremely valuable. Please write to the Quality Assurance Team, University Hospital of North Tees or email: patientinformation@nth.nhs.uk.

Comments, Concerns, Compliments or Complaints

We are continually trying to improve the services we provide.

We want to know what we’re doing well or if there’s anything which we can improve, that’s why the Patient Experience Team is here to help.

Our Patient Experience Team is here to try to resolve your concerns as quickly as possible. If you would like to contact or request a copy of our PET leaflet, please contact:

    telephone: 01642 624719
    Monday – Friday, 9.00 am – 4.00 pm
    Messages can be left on the answering machine and will be picked up throughout the day.

    freephone: 0800 092 0084
    Mobile: (can use text): 0779 506 1883
    Email: patientexperience@nth.nhs.uk

Out of hours if you wish to speak to a senior member of Trust staff, please contact the hospital switchboard who will bleep the appropriate person.

    telephone: 01642 617617
    24 hours a day, 7 days a week

The Patient Experience Team is available to discuss your concerns in person Monday – Friday, 1.30 pm – 4.30 pm.

Data Protection and use of patient information

The Trust has developed a Data Protection Policy in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1988 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. All of our staff respect this policy and confidentiality is adhered to at all times. If you require further information please contact the Head of Communications.

    telephone: 01642 624339 or www.gov.uk/data-protection