



## Georgia Department of Human Resources

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT TUBERCULOSIS (TB)

### **What is tuberculosis (TB)?**

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease that usually affects the lungs, although it can affect any part of the body. TB is caused by the germ *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and is spread person to person through the air.

### **How could I catch TB?**

TB is spread through the air when an infected person puts germs into the air by coughing or sneezing. Some germs remain suspended in the air. These germs must be inhaled and get down into the alveoli (tiny air sacs) of a person's lungs for someone to become infected. People who become infected have usually spent a lot of time in close contact with a person who has infectious TB in the lungs. Most people who are exposed briefly don't become infected. TB is not spread by brief contact, contact with utensils, food or handshakes. TB in parts of the body other than the lungs or throat is not considered to be infectious.

### **What are the symptoms?**

A productive cough lasting more than three weeks, fever, chills, night sweats, getting tired easily, loss of appetite, weight loss and coughing up blood may be symptoms of infectious tuberculosis of the lungs.

### **How dangerous is TB?**

Without treatment, TB can be fatal. However, most cases can be cured if the patient takes anti-tuberculosis medication consistently for at least six months. HIV-positive people who are TB-infected are more likely to get the disease, and they should be strongly encouraged to seek treatment for infection before it progresses to disease.

### **Who is most likely to have TB?**

Anyone can get TB, but some persons are at higher risk. Persons who have recently been infected, close contacts and children are at higher risk. Those with conditions such as HIV, diabetes, certain cancers, chronic renal failure, low body weight and organ transplants are also at higher risk.

TB spreads easiest among people who live in crowded, poorly ventilated housing, are in poor health and have the least access to regular medical care. Also, immigrants from countries where TB is common are more likely to be infected or have the disease. TB can spread easily in shelters, prisons, nursing homes and other institutions where people are in poorly ventilated places for long periods of time.

### **What is the difference between Latent TB Infection (LTBI) and active TB disease?**

Persons with LTBI have the TB germs in the body, but they are not sick because their immune system is keeping the germs from growing. These persons do not have any symptoms of TB and *can't spread the germs to others*. LTBI can be treated to prevent the person from developing TB disease.

Persons with active TB disease have the TB germs in their body and the germs are growing and multiplying. These persons usually feel sick and have symptoms of TB disease. People with active TB disease of the lungs or throat can spread the germs to others before they are treated. With treatment, a person with active TB disease becomes non-infectious and can be cured.

**What should I do if I think I have been exposed?**

Ask your doctor or health department if you need a Mantoux\_tuberculin skin test (TST).

**What does the skin test mean?**

The tuberculin skin test (TST) shows whether a person is infected with TB. If the test is positive, more tests will be given to rule out active TB disease. After TB disease is ruled out, the person is said to have Latent TB Infection (LTBI) and may need to take medication to reduce their chances of ever developing the disease.

**What happens when a person is diagnosed with active TB disease?**

When a case of TB is reported, public health nurses and other health care workers interview the patient to find out who they have been around. These people are contacted to be tested. People with infectious TB can avoid spreading the disease by isolating themselves at home, taking their anti-tuberculosis drugs and covering their mouth and nose with tissue when coughing or sneezing. It usually takes two to four weeks of being on appropriate medication for a person to become non-infectious. Public health nurses arrange for a responsible person to meet with the patient to make sure they take all the medication required to cure the disease and to prevent him or her from infecting others. This is called “directly observed therapy” or DOT. People with active TB disease who do not follow the above instructions can be legally confined to avoid spreading tuberculosis.

**What is multidrug-resistant TB?**

When people in treatment for TB fail to take the medication as directed, the TB bacteria in their body may become drug-resistant. This means the person will continue to be sick and spread the TB bacteria. Multidrug-resistant TB is much more difficult to treat. In Georgia, we have only seen a few cases of drug-resistant TB, not outbreaks, but there have been outbreaks in New York and Florida.

**What about the risk to children at schools and day care centers?**

Day care center staff should be tested when first employed if they have not had a positive skin test before, and then yearly. Young children with active TB rarely infect others. Children with TB have almost always been infected by close family members who have TB. In Georgia, children less than age 5 years of age who have a positive tuberculin skin test are reported to the health department. Public health workers then investigate to find out who may have spread the germs to the child.

For more information about tuberculosis, visit <http://health.state.ga.us/programs/tb> or call (404) 657-2634. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has fact sheets available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/tb/pubs/dtbfax.htm>.