



Frequently asked questions about tuberculosis

What is tuberculosis (TB)?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infection caused by bacteria. TB usually affects the lungs but it can involve the kidneys, bones, spine, brain and other parts of the body.

TB disease is an illness caused by active TB bacteria. The illness may occur shortly after the bacteria enter the body, or many years later. Someone with TB disease has active TB bacteria, plus signs and symptoms of illness.

TB infection occurs when a person breathes in TB bacteria. In most cases, this is because they have had exposure to someone with TB disease (in the lungs). In healthy individuals, the immune (defence) system can control the infection by keeping the bacteria inactive. This is called **latent TB infection (LTBI)**. People with LTBI are not sick and cannot spread TB to others. If left untreated, about 10 percent of people will develop TB disease.

In Australia, active and latent TB can be treated.

What are the signs and symptoms of TB?

- A cough lasting more than three weeks
- Always feeling tired
- Loss of appetite
- Unexplained loss of weight
- Fevers
- Night sweats.

Sometimes there are no symptoms.

How is TB spread?

- TB is usually spread by breathing in the bacteria after someone who has untreated lung TB coughs or sneezes.
- People who breathe in the TB bacteria usually need to have very close contact with someone who has TB disease.

What are the common tests for TB disease?

- Chest x-ray - to show whether TB has affected the lungs
- Sputum - to show whether TB bacteria are present.

What are the common tests for LTBI?

- Tuberculin Skin Test (TST), also known as a Mantoux test
- QuantiFERON blood test.

How is TB treated?

- A course of antibiotics for tuberculosis is prescribed, usually lasting six months.
- They are medicines that you can take at home. You do not usually need to go into hospital for treatment.
- The medicine must be taken as prescribed **without interruption**.

Is TB curable?

Yes

- TB is curable if treated early and properly
- Good compliance is essential for an effective cure.

Where do you go for treatment of TB?

Information, diagnosis and treatment are available free of charge from the TB clinic.

Do I need a referral to attend the TB clinic?

- Generally patients are referred by their GP or other health professionals. However, we can see patients without a referral.

Can I request a female doctor?

There are male and female doctors at the TB clinic, and we will try to meet your request.

Do I have to pay for treatment?

There is no charge for the tests, medicines or visits to the TB clinic.

Is someone with TB infectious?

- **People with LTBI are not infectious.**
- People with TB disease of the lungs or throat can be infectious to others.
- People with TB disease in other parts of the body are not infectious.
- In most cases, after two weeks of taking TB medicine, patients with TB disease of the lungs or throat will no longer be infectious.

Contact tracing

The nurse from the WA Tuberculosis Control Program will assess each patient with TB disease and will identify their contacts who need testing and arrange for this to be done.

- Contacts are often family members, close friends or work mates.
- Contact tracing is always done sensitively and confidentially.

Are there special precautions that a person with TB needs to take?

If someone has TB of the lungs or throat, they should:

- Always cover their mouth with a tissue when they cough or sneeze
- Limit contact with others and stay home from work/school/university or social activities until they are advised by the doctor or TB nurse that they are no longer infectious to others.

Who do I have to tell if I have TB disease?

Only your GP or family doctor and TB clinic staff need to know if you or anyone has TB.

Does TB affect my visa?

No, the Department of Immigration will grant you a bridging visa until your TB treatment has been completed.

Is there a vaccine for TB?

Vaccination for adults is not routine.

Vaccination for children is available in certain circumstances.

Please refer to the [*Bacillus Calmette- Guerin \(BCG\) information sheet*](#) on the Healthy WA website.

I am going to work overseas and have been told I need a BCG, can I get this from your service?

No, the Australian Department of Health does not recommend BCG for adults. The WA Tuberculosis Control Program can offer you a Tuberculin Skin Test (see TST pamphlet) and a document outlining the WA policy for BCG vaccination that you can give to your prospective employer.

How can I access TB services if I move interstate?

You will be referred to the appropriate TB service to ensure access to treatment interstate.

For more information, see the [*Healthy WA website*](#)



WA Tuberculosis Control Program

📍 Anita Clayton Centre,
1/311 Wellington Street, Perth WA 6000

☎ (+61) 08 9222 8500

✉ ACCadmin@health.wa.gov.au

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