FAQs on tuberculosis (TB) and latent TB

Transmission and infection

**How do you get ill with TB?**

When someone with active TB in their lungs coughs or sneezes, they send TB bacteria into the air. If you breathe in these bacteria, one of three things will happen:

* your body kills off the TB bacteria so they cannot harm you now or in the future
* the TB bacteria make you ill and you develop symptoms over the following weeks or months– this is called ‘active TB’
* the TB bacteria remain asleep in your body – this is called ‘latent TB’.

The TB bacteria cannot enter the body through spitting, cuts, sharing food, drink or utensils, or through family lines (heredity). TB in different parts of the body (i.e. TB of lungs, TB of spine, TB of stomach etc.) is all caused by breathing in airborne bacteria which then spreads to other parts of the body.

Only TB of the lungs or throat is infectious. If someone has TB in a different part of their body, their TB is not infectious.

**Can you get TB sitting on a bus/tube/plane?**

It has been found that generally you need to have been in close contact over a number of hours with someone who has infectious TB to have a chance of getting TB. People with infectious TB are usually no longer infectious after they have been on treatment for two weeks.

Prevention and Immunity

**Can you be immune to TB?**

No-one is immune to TB. Anyone can get TB, no matter your age, gender, ethnicity, income, education or background.

**Is there any way I can avoid TB?**

You are more likely to get TB when you are run down or your immune system is weakened. This may happen through severe illnesses (such as HIV), stress or if personal circumstances mean you can’t take as much care of yourself as you usually would. We also know that people are more likely to become ill with TB in the first few years after they move to the UK – this is discussed below in the section on Latent TB.

Some of the best ways to help prevent TB are to do with how you look after yourself. Try to eat a variety of healthy foods, get enough sleep and protect your body by limiting the amount of harmful substances you consume, such as cigarettes, drugs and alcohol. Good cough hygiene, fresh air and sunlight can also all help prevent the spread of TB.

**Doesn’t the BCG protect against TB?**

You might have received a BCG vaccine, most likely soon after you were born. However, the BCG does not give complete protection, and this protection generally wears off after 15 years. Therefore, if you are over 16 years old, your early childhood BCG vaccine will probably no longer be offering you any protection from TB.

In the UK, the BCG vaccine is offered soon after birth to babies who are most at risk of TB.

**I had TB ten years ago. Does that now mean I am free of TB forever?**

TB treatment is very effective and is designed to kill all TB bacteria, provided that all the tablets are taken in the way the doctors instruct. However, it is possible to catch TB more than once in your lifetime. TB is caused by exposure to TB bacteria, so if you breathe in these bacteria again at some later time, you may become ill again, especially if you have a weakened immune system.

Active TB and its Treatment

**What is active TB?**

Active TB is when the TB bacteria make you ill. You will have symptoms, and if you have active TB of the lungs or throat, you can be infectious to other people.

**What are the symptoms of active TB?**

Any two or more of these symptoms could indicate active TB:

* coughing for more than 3 weeks
* coughing blood
* no appetite
* unexplained weight loss
* always tired
* high temperature/fever
* heavy night sweats.

You should see your GP if you are worried about any of these symptoms.

**How is active TB treated?**

The only way to treat active TB is with medication. You need to take the full course of antibiotics in order to protect your health and the health of people around you. TB drug treatment is very effective if taken correctly and it is designed to ensure that all TB bacteria are killed off. Active TB is treated by having a minimum of four different antibiotics and the treatment lasts at least six months.

If you don’t complete the full treatment or you stop and restart treatment, the TB bacteria can remain in your body, possibly infecting family and friends, and the second course of treatment might take longer with more side effects.

**Is treatment free?**

TB testing and TB treatment are free, no matter your immigration status, housing situation, or whether or not you are registered with a GP, or even if you are visiting from another country. GP services are also free and open to everyone. You can find your local practice here: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk).

**I’m pregnant and have TB. What are the risks of taking TB medication?**

TB treatment can be taken during pregnancy. In most cases, the risks to the baby are greater if you do not take TB treatment than if you do take the treatment. Your TB doctor or nurse would discuss this with you in detail.

If I come forward for help with TB symptoms, will I be reported to immigration?

TB testing and treatment will not affect your immigration status in any way. Any information you give will only be used for health purposes.

Latent TB and its Treatment

**What is latent TB?**

If you breathe in TB bacteria and your body doesn’t manage to kill them off, they may remain asleep in your body. This is called latent TB. Latent TB can wake up at any time and make you ill with active TB.

You do not have symptoms with latent TB and you are not infectious. You cannot pass it on to anyone else.

Latent TB can only be detected with a blood test or TB skin test. X-rays cannot see if you are infected with latent TB.

**Why do new migrants need to get a test for latent TB?**

If you have recently come to the UK from a country that has a lot of TB, you are more likely to have caught latent TB before you came to the UK. And latent TB is more likely to wake up and make you ill during your first few years of living in the UK.

Even if you have had an X-ray as part of your visa application, this cannot see if you have latent TB bacteria in your body.

**Why should I be tested and treated for latent TB if I do not feel ill?**

Latent TB does not have symptoms, but it has the potential to make you ill. 1 in 10 people with latent TB develop active TB, and there is no way to know if you will be one of them. Treating your latent TB means you will be much less likely to develop active TB in the future. Treatment with antibiotics is the only way to remove latent TB bacteria from your body.

**What factors heighten the risk of a latent TB infection becoming active TB?**

You are more at risk of developing active TB if you have another health condition that affects your immune system. This includes illnesses such as diabetes or HIV, taking immune suppressant medication, and also pregnancy.

**I have received a positive test result. What happens now?**

This means that you have TB bacteria in your body, but don’t worry because latent TB can be treated with a course of antibiotics. Your GP will refer you to a TB clinic where you will be offered treatment.

**How is latent TB treated?**

Latent TB is treated with one or two antibiotics over three to six months to help prevent active TB.

**Do the antibiotics have any side effects?**

For some people there can be side effects, but other people get no side effects at all. The TB nurse would discuss this with you before you start any treatment.

**I have received a negative test result. What happens now?**

A negative test result means that you do not have TB bacteria in your body – this is good news. However, you might breathe in TB bacteria in the future, especially if you frequently visit a country that has a lot of TB. So make sure you are aware of the signs and symptoms of TB, and if you are ever worried about TB speak to your GP.

**Which new migrants are eligible for the latent TB test at their GP?**

You are eligible for a latent TB test at your GP if you:

* are aged 16-35
* have lived or spent more than 6 months in a high incidence TB country
* moved to the UK within the last 5 years.

**Why are these criteria for new migrants?**

People aged 16-35 would benefit most from latent TB testing and treatment, and will be encouraged to take up a test through theirGP. People outside this age range can still be tested for latent TB through the local TB nurse, if they meet the country criteria or there are any concerns about their risk of TB or latent TB (see below).

You are much more likely to have been infected with latent TB if you have spent six months or more in a country with lots of TB.

Only those who have moved to the UK within the last five years are eligible because these are the years that any latent TB bacteria in your body are mostly likely to ‘wake up’ and make you ill, as your body adjusts to life in a new country.

**What do I do if I don’t meet the criteria?**

If you do not meet these criteria but would still like a latent TB test, contact your area’s TB nurse team (details below). Your TB nurse will be able to give you advice on if you need a latent TB test, and if you should attend the TB clinic.

[Note: Insert local TB nurse contact details here. TB nurses will be able to answer more complex queries around TB and latent TB.]