

About Tuberculosis

TB is caused by a type of bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. Active TB disease usually affects the lungs, but can also affect other parts of the body. Symptoms of active TB disease include a persistent cough that lasts more than three weeks, low-grade fever, night sweats, fatigue, weight loss and chest pain.

2. TB is spread when the person suffering from active TB disease coughs the TB bacteria into the air, and the bacteria is inhaled by those who have close and prolonged contact with an infectious individual. Transmission of the TB bacteria usually requires prolonged exposure (days to weeks, rather than minutes to hours). A person cannot get TB from sharing cups, utensils or food. TB is also not spread through shaking hands, kissing, touching bed linens or toilet seats.

3. The TB vaccine (Bacillus Calmette–Guérin (BCG)) given at birth is effective at preventing the serious forms of TB (such as TB involving the linings of the brain [TB meningitis]) in young children. But it does not protect against lung TB in adults.

Latent TB infection

4. When a person is exposed to the TB bacteria from an infectious active TB case, they may develop latent TB infection. Persons with latent TB infection do not have symptoms of TB (e.g., cough) and cannot spread TB to others. The TB bacteria remains inactive in their body in about 90% of healthy adults with latent TB infection.

5. In about 5% of persons with latent TB infection, active TB disease develops in the first two years after acquiring latent TB infection. Another 5% of persons with latent TB infection may develop active TB disease later during their lifetime, especially with ageing. The risk of developing active TB disease is higher in persons with a weak immune system and young children under five years of age.

6. Latent TB infection is not uncommon in Singaporeans. The prevalence of latent TB infection increases with age, ranging from 2% among persons aged between 18 and 29 years old to 29% among those aged between 70 and 79 years old.

Treatment of Active TB Disease

7. Persons with active TB disease will be started on treatment immediately. Persons who do not adhere to their medications have a higher chance of developing drug resistance, treatment failure, and future disease relapse. Directly Observed Treatment (DOT) therefore remains a pillar of TB treatment. DOT consists of daily administration of TB medicines by a trained nurse to the patient. To prevent disruption to TB treatment, patients are counselled on the importance of adhering to DOT for the entire duration of their treatment regimen. It is in the best interest of the patient and the community that TB patients adhere to the recommended treatment protocol.

8. Persons found to have latent TB infection will be offered treatment if suitable, to reduce their risk of developing active TB disease in the future.