

# TUBERCULOSIS (TB): The Meaning of a Positive Test

## TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

### DESCRIPTION

Tuberculosis, also called TB, is an infection caused by a bacteria. Tuberculosis usually affects the lungs, but it can spread to the kidneys, bones, spine, brain, and other parts of the body.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF I HAVE A POSITIVE TEST?

The most commonly used skin test to check for tuberculosis is the PPD. If you have a positive PPD, it means you have been exposed to a person who has tuberculosis and you are now infected with the bacteria that causes the disease.

### DO I HAVE TUBERCULOSIS IF I HAVE A POSITIVE PPD TEST?

Not necessarily. A person can be infected with the bacteria that causes tuberculosis and not have tuberculosis disease. This is called **latent TB infection**. Many people are infected with the bacteria that causes tuberculosis, but only a few of these people (about 10%) go on to develop the disease. People who have the disease are said to have "active" tuberculosis.

Healthy people who get infected with the tuberculosis bacteria may be able to fight off the infection and not get tuberculosis disease. The bacteria is dormant (inactive) in their lungs. If the body is not able to fight off the infection and the bacteria continues to grow, active tuberculosis develops.

### WOULD I KNOW IF I DEVELOPED ACTIVE TUBERCULOSIS?

You might not know that you have active tuberculosis. Tuberculosis bacteria can grow in your body without making you feel sick. However, most people with active tuberculosis don't feel well. People with tuberculosis often feel tired and have a cough that won't go away. They may also lose weight, or have a fever, or break out in a sweat in bed (called "night sweats"). They may have trouble breathing. If you have active tuberculosis, you will have to get regular checkups for the rest of your life to make sure you stay free of disease, even after you have taken tuberculosis medicine.

### WHAT IF I HAVE A POSITIVE TEST BUT I HAD BCG VACCINE IN THE PAST?

Many individuals who grew up in countries other than the United States or Canada have received the BCG (Bacille Calmette-Guerin) vaccine against tuberculosis. Studies have shown, however, that although some people are protected by this vaccine, many are either not protected at all, or are immune for only a short time.

If you have a positive reaction to the TB skin test and have received BCG, the nurse will consider certain factors and advise you on what to do next. Some of those factors may be: the extent of the reaction; whether you come from a country with a high incidence

of TB; whether you have had contact with a person with active TB; and how many doses of BCG you have received. BCG vaccination is not a guarantee against becoming infected with TB, and a positive TB test is probably not due to prior vaccination with BCG. The importance of the skin test is that it shows if you have been exposed to tuberculosis; it helps determine if you are at risk for developing the disease and treatment can be provided before you become sick.

### DOES A POSITIVE TEST MEAN THAT I CAN GIVE TUBERCULOSIS TO SOMEONE ELSE?

Not necessarily. After you have a positive PPD skin test, you must have a chest x-ray and a physical exam to make sure that you don't have active disease and that you're not contagious (able to spread the disease).

### WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I HAVE INACTIVE OR LATENT TB INFECTION?

To be sure that you remain healthy, your doctor may recommend that you take medicine for 9 months to kill the tuberculosis infection. If you don't take the medicine, the bacteria will remain in your lungs, and you will always be in danger of getting active tuberculosis. The medicine used to treat tuberculosis infection is isoniazid, which is also called INH. You need to take 1 pill every day for nine months.

### WHAT IF I FORGET TO TAKE MY MEDICINE?

It is very important that if you agree to take the medicine, you take it every day. Keep the medicine in a place where you will always see it. Take it at the same time every day. Ask your medical provider what to do if you forget to take a pill.

### DO I NEED TO DO ANYTHING ELSE?

Every month you will need to visit your medical provider to get another bottle of the medicine you are taking and to be sure you don't have any side effects or problems from the medicine. If you are feeling well, your medical provider will give you a prescription for the next month. It is important that you stop drinking alcohol while taking INH. Drinking alcohol while taking the medicine increases your risk of liver damage. It is also recommended that you avoid pregnancy while on the medication. Your medical provider may encourage you to take a daily multivitamin containing vitamin B<sub>6</sub>.

### COULD I STILL GET ACTIVE TUBERCULOSIS AFTER I TAKE THE MEDICINE FOR 9 MONTHS?

Even after you take the medicine every day for nine months, there is a small chance that you could develop active TB disease because some bacteria are resistant to the medicine. Staying healthy depends on having sensible living habits. You need enough sleep and exercise and a healthy diet to keep up your health and resistance to the tuberculosis bacteria.

Student Health Center



[WWW.SIU.EDU/~SHC](http://WWW.SIU.EDU/~SHC)

This information is for educational purposes only. Consult your doctor for specific medical advice, diagnosis and treatment.

618-453-3311

Dial-A-Nurse is available after-hours until 10:30 p.m. during fall and spring semesters. In case of emergency dial 911.