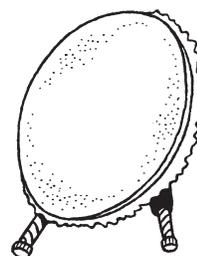


Information for Inuit Community Members

Fact Sheet Tuberculosis and HIV



Tuberculosis and HIV

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease that is caused by a germ called Mycobacterium tuberculosis. Anyone who comes in contact with this germ is at risk of developing TB infection. The bacteria usually attack the lungs but TB bacteria can attack any part of the body such as the liver, spine, and brain. If not treated properly, TB can be fatal.

TB was at one time the leading cause of death in North America. Between the 1950s and 1980s, incidence and prevalence of TB decreased almost to the point of eradication. However, since 1985, TB has been steadily increasing, particularly among Aboriginal peoples in North America. TB is once again considered a serious public health concern.

Many years ago, in the 1950's and 60's, Inuit had to go to the south to receive treatment for TB. They would be gone for months at a time and sometimes years. Today, people can be treated for TB at home and the treatment is very effective and less time consuming than in the past.

How is TB spread?

The TB germ is airborne. Coughing, sneezing and/or laughing may transmit the TB germ. The germ is often transmitted to those who are in close or constant contact – e.g. sharing the same living space. The TB germ is breathed in and usually settles in the lungs, as opposed to another bodily organ but it may spread to other parts of the body.

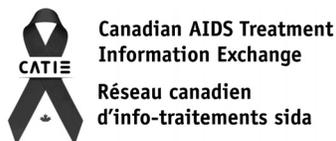
It should be noted that only those who have active TB (those who are actually sick with TB) are contagious, meaning that they can pass the germ on to others people. A person may test positive for TB but if the germ is inactive or latent, he or she will not pass the TB germ on to others.

How do I know if I have TB?

Anyone can be tested for TB with a simple TB skin test. This test should be done if you have HIV or suspect that you have been in contact with someone who is HIV positive. If you test positive for TB, it means that you have either active TB or latent (inactive) TB. Active TB means that you are sick, potentially contagious and may spread the disease to others. Inactive or latent TB means that although you have the germ, you are not contagious. You should remember that if at any time in your life you have tested positive for TB, you will always have the TB germ.

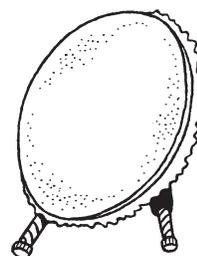
What happens if I test positive for TB?

The doctor will see if your TB is active or latent. There will be a chest x-ray done to see if there has been any damage to the lungs. You may also have to do a sputum (spit from the lungs) test which will show whether you have the TB germ in your lungs. If you are sick (you have active TB) you will be treated with the appropriate antibiotics.



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How is latent TB treated?

If a person is diagnosed with latent TB, they are still at risk of developing active TB later in their life. The doctor may, therefore prescribe medications that will have to be taken for up to nine (9) months. If you are living with HIV, your risk of developing active TB is high and you should take the preventive treatment the doctor prescribes for you.

How is active TB treated?

Usually, a person with active TB will be hospitalized for a few weeks. Once he or she has been on medication for a few weeks, they will not be considered contagious (the germ cannot be spread). At this point, the person will be discharged from hospital to return to his or her everyday life but he or she will likely continue to take medication for 6 months.

Tuberculosis and HIV

People who are HIV positive tend to develop TB easily if they have the TB germ or get exposed to this germ. If a person who is HIV positive develops TB, this illness may kill him or her because of his or her weak immune system.

What is the risk of developing TB in HIV positive people?

People who are HIV positive have a higher risk of developing TB disease if they are already infected with the germ even if it is latent TB. Because HIV attacks the immune system, infections such as TB pose a greater risk to people who are HIV positive.

Can I get treated for both HIV and TB at the same time?

The use of therapy for HIV may sometimes complicate the treatment of TB due to the side effects of medications. Depending on the individual situation, a person may take a break from HIV medication to be treated for TB or they may take both medications at the same time. Those who are in later stages of HIV could die from TB or other infections.

Medication for TB

It is very important that once your doctor has prescribed medication for TB that you finish the entire prescription and take the medications exactly as prescribed. If you do not complete all the pills that have been prescribed to you, you will be at high risk of having your TB disease return, only this time, you may be resistant to the TB antibiotics. This will complicate your future treatment and increase the length of time that you will have to be on medication.

Side effects

Sometimes medications for TB can make people feel unwell. If this happens to you, talk to your nurse or doctor. Often these side effects can go away as you take the TB medicine. It is important to see your nurse or doctor regularly while you are taking your antibiotics to make sure that they are working and that you are getting better.

