

Nonrespiratory Tuberculosis

What is it?

- TB is an infection caused by a bacterium called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. It enters your body through the air you breathe. TB infection usually affects the lungs, but can affect any part of the body (e.g. lymph nodes, kidneys, bladder, spine).

What is Nonrespiratory TB?

- When TB germs cause disease outside the lungs, it is called nonrespiratory TB. The most common types of nonrespiratory TB in Canada are TB of the lymph nodes and TB of the kidneys and bladder.

How do you get nonrespiratory TB?

- TB is spread person to person through the air. TB bacteria are expelled into the air when a person with TB of the lungs coughs, talks, sneezes or sings. TB is most often spread to people who spend a lot of time with the person who has the disease. People at highest risk are those living in the same household or setting (e.g. long-term care home, shelter, jail) and close non-household contacts who are very young (<5 years) or have a weak immune system e.g. someone with cancer or diabetes.
- People who have nonrespiratory TB first breathed TB bacteria into their lungs which then travelled to other parts of the body through the blood stream. People who have nonrespiratory TB **cannot** spread TB to others.

What are the symptoms of nonrespiratory TB?

- There is not one group of symptoms that represents nonrespiratory TB therefore it can be hard to diagnose. Symptoms may be vague (e.g. fever, night sweats, weight loss) or they may be related to the part of the body involved (e.g. swollen lymph nodes, back pain, joint pain, abdominal pain). If nonrespiratory TB is suspected, tests need to be done to confirm the diagnosis.

What are the tests for nonrespiratory TB?

- **Biopsy**—A small piece of tissue is taken from the suspected body part and is tested for the presence of TB bacteria.

- **Sputum Smear and Culture:** At least three sputum specimens should be collected and tested. Smear means the specimen is examined under a microscope to look for TB bacteria. The result can usually be obtained in one or two days. However, a smear result can't be used for diagnosis. Every sputum specimen that is sent for smear is also set up for culture at the lab. Culture is the "gold standard" for TB diagnosis and it can take 2-8 weeks for a result.
- **Tuberculin Skin Test (TST):** A TST detects the presence of TB bacteria in the body. A TST should never be relied on alone to diagnose or rule out TB.

How is nonrespiratory TB Treated?

- There are medications used to treat nonrespiratory TB. They are the same medications used to treat TB of the lungs and they are provided free of charge by the health unit.
- TB treatment takes a very long time (up to one year) to kill all of the TB bacteria. Some people might want to stop taking the medications when they start to feel better. However, if someone stops taking their medications too soon it can cause the TB to become stronger and harder to kill, and in some cases, resistant to TB medications.
- The goal of TB treatment is to take 100% of the prescribed doses of medication for the complete length of time they were prescribed.
- **Note:** You must get an assessment and a prescription from a healthcare provider prior to the health unit dispensing TB medications free of charge.

For further information, please contact the Communicable Disease Control Program staff at 705-474-1400 or 1-800-563-2808, ext 2229.

References:

Canadian Thoracic Society (CTS) of the Canadian Lung Association (CLA); Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). (2014). Canadian Tuberculosis Standards. 7th edition.

Ontario. 2011. Tuberculosis Prevention & Control Guidance Document. Toronto. ON: MOHLTC

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