

## WHAT IS TUBERCULOSIS?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease caused by a bacterium (*Mycobacterium tuberculosis*).

### How can you catch tuberculosis?

The infection is acquired by inhaling the droplets, which an infected person coughs and sneezes. TB is usually only caught after prolonged contact with an infected person, such as living or working in close proximity.

### Who is at risk?

Anyone can get TB, however some people are more likely to be susceptible. Those whose body defences have been weakened by other illnesses and those who live in overcrowded conditions or are homeless.

Those at greatest risk of acquiring TB are:

- Some health care workers who regularly come into contact with patients with pulmonary TB lung infection.
- Those who have a weakened immune system such as those with HIV or AIDS.
- Those people taking immunosuppressive therapy.
- Those from regions of the world where TB is more common and those returning from such regions.
- Those who live in overcrowded conditions or are homeless.
- Those with chronic debilitating diseases.
- Alcohol and drug misusers.

### Is there a lot of TB in the United Kingdom?

TB worldwide is a massive problem. In England cases fell progressively until the mid-1980s but started to rise again in the early 1990s. Cases have increased by 25% in the last 10 years. Around 6,500 cases are now reported each year. TB is curable with a course of special antibiotics taken for at least 6 months. The most important part of controlling TB is identifying and treating those who already have the disease, to shorten their infection and to stop it being passed on to others (DoH, 2006). This is because:-

- We have good living conditions
- Levels of immunisation are high
- The disease is usually quickly identified and treated promptly
- When disease is identified the medical team check family and friends for signs and symptoms and give early treatment whenever necessary.

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/HealthAndSocialCareTopics/Tuberculosis/fs/en>.

### What are the common symptoms of tuberculosis?

The most common symptoms of TB are:

- Cough with or without phlegm for 3 weeks or more
- Tiredness
- Swollen glands (particularly in the neck)
- Loss of appetite
- Loss of weight
- Night sweats
- Coughing up blood may occur fairly late on in the progress of the illness.

### How is TB diagnosed?

TB is usually diagnosed after a number of tests have been carried out including a skin test (Heaf or Mantoux), chest x-ray and sputum examination.

### Further Information

Tuberculosis in the UK: Report 2011 [www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb\\_C/1317131791612](http://www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb_C/1317131791612)

