

Facts About Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious illness caused by a slow-growing bacteria that is spread from person to person in the air. It is much less contagious than flu, colds, strep germs, and, because it grows slowly, most infections are asymptomatic and do not cause an illness until months, or even years later.

Only one in ten infected people eventually become ill with tuberculosis (active TB). Most TB illness (70 percent) occurs in the lungs. TB also occurs in lymph glands, bones and joints. About one-half of cases where the TB is in the lungs are contagious to the public.

Active tuberculosis in Maryland occurs in about one out of 16,000 residents per year. Usually only two or three people out of all the people who have been exposed to an active case will react to a skin test. This does not mean the people have active TB. It simply means the skin test shows they have been exposed to TB. A chest x-ray will be required to determine whether the person has TB.

New infections are identified by a TB skin test. Most individuals with a positive skin test have a normal chest x-ray and no symptoms. These individuals are not contagious to others.

For every active case of TB in the community, there are about 1000 people who test positive on skin tests but do not have active TB.

Persons with TB infections (positive skin tests) can receive preventive therapy with an antibiotic that reduces the chance of future development of active TB by 95 percent.

A respiratory case is contagious during the several weeks prior to diagnosis. Cases on treatment become non-contagious within a short period of time. It usually takes a minimum of several hours of close contact in a small room for TB transmission to occur. The air space is contagious only when the untreated patient is present. After the patient leaves, the organisms dissipate to negligible numbers.

Face masks have been shown to be effective barriers to transmission of TB when worn by medical attendants in the presence of untreated cases.

With modern treatment, even if active TB develops in an individual, the cure rate is almost 100 percent.

Thus, highly effective strategies exist to treat and cure cases to prevent transmission and to prevent future active cases in those who have asymptomatic infection.