



# Tuberculosis (TB)

*A disease that requires airborne respirator precautions*

**This handout describes tuberculosis and its symptoms. It also explains how this disease can be spread and how to keep others from getting it.**

**To learn more about tuberculosis, visit this**

**Web site:**

**[www.cdc.gov/tb/pubs/tbfactsheets/tb.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/tb/pubs/tbfactsheets/tb.htm)**

## What is tuberculosis?

*Tuberculosis* (TB) is a disease that is caused by bacteria (germ) called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. The bacteria usually attack the lungs. But, TB bacteria can attack any part of the body, including the kidneys, spine, and brain. If it is not treated properly, TB disease can be fatal. At one time, TB was the leading cause of death in the United States.

Not everyone infected with TB bacteria becomes sick. People who are not sick have what is called *latent TB infection*. They do not have any symptoms and they cannot spread TB to others. But, some people with latent TB infection sometimes do get active TB disease.

People with active TB disease can be treated and cured if they get medical help. People with latent TB infection can take medicine so that they will not develop active TB disease.

Tuberculosis is a “reportable” disease. This means the health department is notified whenever a case is diagnosed so that others who have come in contact with you and may become ill can be protected.

## How is tuberculosis spread?

TB is spread through the air from one person to another. The bacteria are put into the air when a person with active TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, talks, or sneezes. People nearby may breathe in these bacteria and become infected.

## What are the symptoms?

People with active TB usually have a bad cough that lasts 3 weeks or longer. They may also have chest pain, cough up blood or *sputum* (secretions produced in the lungs), feel weak, have no appetite, lose weight, and have fever, chills, or night sweats.

**People with symptoms of active TB should practice “respiratory hygiene.” This means they should wear a mask, wash their hands often, and dispose of used tissues in wastebaskets when coming into a health care facility.**

## Questions?

Call 206-598-6122

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff is also available to help.

Healthcare  
Epidemiology and  
Infection Control:  
206-598-6122

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Tissues, masks, and hand gel are available at hygiene stations placed throughout University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC) and at clinic front desks. “Cover Your Cough” kits are also available at the Information Desk on the 3rd floor, inside the main entrance.**

### How is it diagnosed?

Tuberculosis is diagnosed by its symptoms, a positive TB skin test, a TB blood test, an abnormal chest X-ray, and by testing sputum samples in the laboratory.

### How are others protected at the medical center?

At UWMC, we place an “Airborne Respirator Precautions” sign near the door of the rooms of patients with TB. This alerts health care workers and visitors to use extra precautions around the patient to protect others who are at risk of getting TB. To protect others in the community, health care workers are required to report persons with TB to the health department.

**For the protection of everyone in the medical center, if any of your family members or friends have TB symptoms, even if they have not been diagnosed, they should not visit you. They should see a doctor to get their symptoms checked.**

### What happens when I am in airborne precautions?

Your health care workers and caregivers will wear gowns, gloves, and a respirator when caring for you. For their protection, visitors should wear the protective equipment they are given: an N-95 mask, a gown, and gloves.

**Hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gels, and a clean environment are stressed.**

You will be asked to stay in your room unless you need to go to other departments in the hospital for treatment. This is called being “in precautions.” If you leave your room, you will be asked to wash your hands and to wear a mask, gown, and gloves.

Please do **not** use the nutrition rooms while you are in precautions. When you want a snack or water, ask a member of your health care team to bring it to you.

### When can the precautions be stopped?

People who are diagnosed with tuberculosis are in airborne respirator precautions until 3 sputum specimens do not show any TB bacteria and they are taking the right TB antibiotics and their symptoms are improving. This usually takes about 2 to 3 weeks.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
**MEDICAL CENTER**  
UW Medicine

Healthcare Epidemiology  
and Infection Control

Box 356153

1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195  
206-598-6122