

Tuberculosis Screening

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a bacterial infection that usually infects the lungs and is passed from person to person usually by coughing. TB can also go into the lymph nodes causing swollen glands, the vertebrae (the bones that line the spine) causing collapse of the bones, the intestines causing diarrhea, or the brain causing severe headache and meningitis. If a person's immune system (the way the body fights infection) is hurt or gets lower, such as with chemotherapy or HIV or malnutrition, it is more likely the person will get disease outside the lungs.

How do you screen for tuberculosis infection?

When someone first gets exposed to tuberculosis, their T-cells or CD4 cells (a type of white blood cell called a lymphocyte) attack the tuberculosis and contain it, usually preventing disease. This person is still infected with TB but does not have disease; this is called Latent Tuberculosis Infection or LTBI. Some people will develop disease or sickness in one of the ways mentioned above at the time of the initial infection or many years later.

Screening for TB is usually done by a skin test called the PPD or TST. Your medical provider will measure the amount of swelling 2-3 days after the test is placed on your arm to decide if it is positive. The amount of redness is not important for this test but the swelling is. Usually you need 15 mm of swelling to be considered positive; if you have a known exposure to tuberculosis or have HIV, 5 mm of swelling is considered positive. It is very important that you do not scratch at the area of the test because that can make it swell up incorrectly. A blood test called the Quantiferon test is sometimes used to screen for TB.

What does a positive skin test for TB mean?

A positive test means you have TB infection but does not necessarily mean you are currently sick with TB. If you have a positive PPD, you should have a chest x-ray to look for lung disease. Once you have a positive test, you should not ever have another skin test; instead you would need chest x-rays to screen for disease. Symptoms of active disease with TB include night sweats, weight loss, fever, and coughing up blood.

Do I need treatment if I have a positive skin test?

If your skin test is positive and your chest x-ray is normal, you will need at least 9 months of therapy which usually consists of isoniazid (INH) with vitamin B6 (pyridoxine) daily. If you actually are sick from the tuberculosis, you may need to be put into the hospital and will require many drugs to treat the disease for several months.

If you have further questions, be sure to talk to your primary care provider or your health educator or nurse.



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