Health Department
Kansas City Missouri

Tuberculosis Skin Test (PPD)

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis, or TB, is a disease caused by a bacteria called Mycobacterium tuberculosis. The bacteria can attack any part of your body, but they usually attack the lungs. TB disease was once the leading cause of death in the United States.

How do you get TB?

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

TB is not spread by dishes, drinking glasses, sheets, clothing or by touching a person with the disease.

I know someone who has TB, does that mean I am infected?

The majority of people exposed to a person with active TB disease do not become infected. TB is not a disease that is easily spread in most situations. However, without a TB skin test (PPD) there is no way to know whether or not you are infected.

When a person who has active TB disease is reported to the Health Department an investigation is begun to determine who that person may have infected. The Health Department begins the investigation with household contacts of the case and other persons who met criteria for "intimate" sharing of air space, such as members of a car pool. Depending on the results of the first investigation, the circle of people who had contact with the person with active TB disease may be expanded. So just because someone at your job, for example, has active TB disease, does not automatically mean you were at any risk of becoming infected.

It has been determined that I need to be tested for TB infection. What does this involve?

A health care worker will inject a small amount of fluid (called tuberculin or PPD) just under the skin on the lower part of your arm. After 2 or 3 days, the health care worker will measure your reaction to the test. You may have a small bump where the tuberculin was injected. The health care worker will tell you if your reaction to the test is positive or negative. A positive reaction usually means that you have TB infection.

If your skin test is negative and you are considered a close contact to the person with active TB disease, you may be asked to take another skin test in a few months just to make sure that you are not infected.

If your skin test is positive and you had a negative TB skin test in the past, you will be considered a skin test converter, meaning that you probably were infected between that time and now. If you were never tested before or cannot remember if you were tested, there is no way to know when you were infected.

Should I take test if I have had a positive reaction before?

No. Once your skin test is positive it will always be positive. You will be evaluated through a series of questions and other laboratory tests.

What if I had the BCG vaccine?

BCG is a vaccine for TB that is used in other countries where TB is common and, in the United States, for the treatment of certain cancers. Even though you have had BCG, you should take the TB skin test. If you have a positive reaction, it could be due to the BCG vaccine itself, but would mean you probably have TB infection if :

- your skin test reaction is large
- you were vaccinated many years ago, because the BCG reaction gets smaller over time
- someone in your family has had TB
- you are from a country where TB is very common, such as most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.

My skin test is positive. Now what happens?

If you have a positive TB skin test then other tests will be done to see if you have TB disease. These tests include chest x-ray, a medical evaluation, and possibly a test of a sputum that you cough up. Because the TB bacteria may be found somewhere else than in your lungs, your physician may check your blood, urine, or do other tests.

I don't have active TB just infection. What can be done for me?

Whether your skin test has changed from negative to positive or, if your are under 35 years of age and simply have a positive test, you should be offered preventive treatment to keep you from developing TB disease. The medicine usually used for preventive treatment is a drug called isoniazid or INH. INH kills the TB bacteria that are inactive in your body. If you take your medication as prescribed, preventive therapy will keep you from ever developing TB disease.

The Health Department will provide INH to you free-of-charge. You must take INH for at least 6 months. During your treatment the Health Department will check on how you are doing. Very few people have serious side effects to INH and those will be explained to

you by the Health Department. Should you develop any of following side effects, call the Health Department or your physician right away:

- loss of appetite
- nausea
- vomiting
- yellowish skin or eyes
- fever for more than 3 days
- abdominal pain
- tingling in the fingers and toes

Taking preventive therapy is extremely important if you are HIV infected. You may be at high risk of developing active TB depending on the status of your immune system.

WARNING: Drinking alcoholic beverages (wine, beer and liquor) while taking INH can be dangerous.

Does a positive skin test mean I can give TB to someone else?

No. If you have a positive skin test and no active TB, you cannot transmit the bacteria to someone else.