

# Information – latent tuberculosis

## What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis is a bacterial infection that mainly affects the lungs but could also affect other organs in the body.

## How is tuberculosis contracted?

When a person with pulmonary tuberculosis coughs or sneezes, the bacteria are spread in the air and people nearby could inhale the bacteria. Not everyone who is exposed to the infection actually becomes infected.

## What is latent tuberculosis?

The majority of people who become infected do not become ill. The body's defence mechanisms (the immune system) can prevent the bacteria from growing. Even though the bacteria are not active, they remain dormant in the body. This is known as latent tuberculosis.

A person with latent tuberculosis

- is healthy
- cannot pass on tuberculosis to other people
- has a positive PPD (skin test) or IGRA (blood test)

## Can latent tuberculosis progress to become active?

Yes, although it is unusual. Nine out of ten people with latent tuberculosis never develop active tuberculosis. The risk of the tuberculosis infection becoming activated is higher

- for newly infected persons during the first two years after initial infection
- for young children
- following a pregnancy
- if a person has other diseases or medication that affect the immune system

## What are the symptoms of active tuberculosis?

- A persistent cough that lasts for more than three weeks
- Fever
- Night sweats
- Involuntary weight loss
- Swollen lymph glands

If any of these symptoms occur, a doctor should be contacted to exclude the possibility of active tuberculosis.

## Can latent tuberculosis be treated?

Treatment for latent tuberculosis is given in certain cases to reduce the risk of the infection later developing into active tuberculosis. Individuals who have been recently infected, or who for some other reason run an increased risk of developing active tuberculosis, can be treated.