

Treating latent tuberculosis (TB)

Infectious Diseases

Information for Patients

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What is tuberculosis (TB)?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infection caused by TB bacteria (germs). TB usually affects the lungs but can affect all parts of the body.

When people talk about TB they usually mean active TB. If you have active TB, the bacteria are making you ill and if they are in your lungs you may be passing the infection on to other people.

How do people catch TB?

When someone with TB in their lungs coughs or sneezes, they can send the TB bacteria into the air which others can breathe in. Some people breathe in the TB bacteria and become sick quickly with active TB. Other people may get TB infection but it will be 'asleep' in the body. This is called **latent tuberculosis infection (LTBI)**.

If you have been diagnosed with latent TB:

- you are not ill.
- latent TB is not infectious to others.
- there is no need to stay away from school/ work/ other people.

Why treat it?

About 1 in 10 people with latent TB will develop active TB in the future. There is no way to know if you will be one of them. Treatment is available for latent TB infection, and this treatment reduces the risk of latent TB waking up and becoming active.

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What is the treatment for latent TB?

The medicines which are given are antibiotics called rifampicin and isoniazid. These may be given in combination or separately, and your doctor will decide which treatment is likely to suit you best. Treatment lasts for between 3 and 9 months, depending upon which treatment is chosen.

It is really important that the tablets are taken every day otherwise they do not work.

All TB treatment is free for everyone in England when it is prescribed from the TB clinic.

Does the treatment have any side effects?

Most people do not have any side effects, however some possible side effects might include:

- if you are on rifampicin your wee (urine) and other body fluids will become orange in colour - this is normal and to be expected.
- itchy rash.
- tiredness or lethargy or irritability.
- feeling or being sick (nausea or vomiting) or stomach upsets.
- headache.
- flu-like symptoms.
- pins and needles.

If any of these problems happen, please contact the TB nurse specialists.

For a very small number of people this medication can irritate the liver (hepatitis). In severe cases hepatitis can lead to vomiting, yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice) and itching. If this happens you must stop taking the medication and immediately contact the TB nurse specialist.

Remember - continue taking the medication unless your doctor or TB nurse specialist tells you not to.

Follow-up care whilst on treatment

Once your treatment has been prescribed, you will usually be contacted by a nurse from the TB Service. You can contact them if you have any concerns about side effects or your treatment.

You will usually have regular outpatient appointments.

How to take your medication

- The medication should be taken as prescribed. This is usually in the morning 30 to 60 minutes **before you eat your breakfast**.
- You should also have something to eat 30 to 60 minutes **after taking your tablets**, otherwise you may experience stomach problems.
- Try not to miss any doses; the whole course of treatment must be taken for it to be fully effective.
- Avoid alcohol whilst taking this medication. It is rare that your medication will affect your liver but if you drink alcohol whilst taking it, it can increase the risk of liver problems.
- Occasionally, some people can develop an allergic reaction to certain foods whilst taking TB medication. In particular, cheese and tropical fish (tuna) may trigger rashes, itching or flushing. If you experience this, please tell your TB specialist nurse and try not to eat these foods. Alcohol should be avoided.

Contact details

TB Service, Glenfield Hospital, Leicester: 0116 258 3767

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