Tuberculosis (TB)
Summary

- Tuberculosis (TB) is an uncommon infectious disease in Victoria.
- Only people with active TB of the lungs or larynx can pass on the infection.
- TB can be treated with medication.
- Immunisation against TB is not recommended for the general population of Victoria.

Tuberculosis, commonly known as TB, is an infectious disease caused by infection with the Mycobacterium tuberculosis bacterium. Typically TB affects the lungs but it can also infect any other organ of the body. It is spread from person to person through the air when someone with an active infection of the lungs or throat coughs, sings, laughs or sneezes.

Most people infected with TB do not have any symptoms although there is a 10 per cent lifetime risk that symptoms will develop later into an active infection. In people without symptoms, medications can help reduce the risk of the infection developing into active disease. People who are young or elderly or who have weakened immune systems are more prone to active infection. TB was once the leading cause of death in many countries but, due to effective treatment and prevention programs, it is now uncommon in the Australian-born population.

Causes of TB

TB is spread when a person with an active disease of the lungs or upper airways (nose and throat) coughs, sings, laughs or sneezes. People nearby may breathe in the exhaled bacteria and become infected. The bacteria can settle in the lungs and begin to grow. From there, the bacteria can move through the blood or lymphatic system to other parts of the body such as the kidney, spine and brain. Although TB infection in the lungs or throat can be spread to other people, TB in other parts of the body is usually not infectious. An infected person who does not have active disease cannot transmit TB to another person. These people have latent (or 'sleeping') TB. Sometimes, a mother who has active TB disease that has not yet been treated can pass the bacteria to her baby before or during birth (congenital tuberculosis), although this is extremely rare. There have been very few reported cases of this in the world.

High-risk groups for TB

The number of people who get TB in Victoria is low – about 400 cases per year. Most cases are in people who were born overseas. The most common way to catch TB is if you have close contact over a long period of time with somebody who has untreated, active disease in the lungs.

People who are at higher risk of developing active TB infection include:

- migrants and refugees
- Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders (in northern Australia)
- people living with a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection or have acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)
- people with weakened immune systems
- people with alcoholism
- people who are older
- people living in institutions
- people living in overcrowded conditions
- people with diabetes
- health professionals.

Symptoms of active TB

Some of the symptoms of active TB infection include:

- persistent cough
- tiredness
- night sweats
- weight loss
- coughing up blood.

Diagnosis of TB

If your doctor thinks you have TB, diagnosis is simple.

Methods used to diagnose TB may include:

- medical history

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• skin test (the tuberculin skin test using the Mantoux procedure)
• blood test
• a chest x-ray – to show whether TB has affected the lungs
• a sputum test – to see if TB bacteria are present in coughed-up sputum.

You should be tested for TB if you are:
• living with HIV or AIDS
• living or working in close contact with someone who has recently been diagnosed with active TB
• having any TB symptoms.

Treatment for TB

If you have TB, your doctor may prescribe a course of tablets or suggest regular chest x-rays. Active TB infection can be treated with medication, usually at a major public hospital or by a specialist physician. It will take at least six months to cure TB, sometimes longer.

It is very important that you take the full course of treatment. If you don’t, the TB infection might return and will be harder to cure because the TB bacteria might become resistant to the medication.

Side effects of TB medications

Like all medications, your anti-tuberculosis tablets can cause side effects. Your doctor will monitor your progress during treatment to make sure the medication is working. This will usually involve blood, sputum or urine tests and chest x-rays.

Side effects may include:

• nausea or vomiting
• jaundice – yellowish skin or eyes, dark urine (orange/red urine is a normal side effect and is not harmful)
• unexplained fever or tiredness
• tingling (pins and needles) or numbness of hands or feet, or joint pains
• skin rash, itching skin or bruising
• visual changes such as blurred vision or a change in red-green colour vision.

Side effects of specific tuberculosis medications

The different medications used to treat tuberculosis are associated with specific side effects:

• isoniazid – may make you feel tired or nauseous or make you lose your appetite. It can cause numbness or tingling in your hands or feet, but this is rare in well-nourished people. It can also cause inflammation of the liver, so your doctor will regularly check for this with blood tests
• rifampicin – can reduce the effectiveness of the contraceptive pill and some other medications. It is important to advise the doctor who prescribes your TB treatment about any other medicines you are taking. Women taking the contraceptive pill may need to discuss other forms of contraception with their general practitioner or an advisor at a family planning clinic. If you have lens implants or wear soft contact lenses, inform your doctor, as rifampicin can stain them. Rifampicin will cause a pinkish/orange discolouration of your urine, saliva and sweat. This side effect is harmless so you should not be concerned
• ethambutol (Myambutol) – can cause visual problems. Your eyesight will be checked during treatment, but you should stop taking the medication if your vision is affected and call your doctor straight away
• pyrazinamide – can lead to nausea and a loss of appetite. It is usually only taken for the first two to three months of treatment. Consult with your doctor if you develop unexplained rashes, fever, aches or joint pains.

Some things to note when taking TB medications

When taking tuberculosis medications, it is important to be aware of a few basic cautions including:

• Report any side effects to your doctor immediately.
• Tell your TB doctor about any other medications you are taking.
• Ensure you take the medication long enough to kill all of the tuberculosis bacteria – for a minimum of six months.
• Take your medications regularly and do not stop taking them, even when you feel better. Irregular use can lead to the tuberculosis bacteria becoming resistant to the medications.
• Avoid drinking alcohol while on tuberculosis treatment. Alcohol can increase drug side effects and toxicity, because both can affect the liver.

Immunisation against TB

The vaccine against TB is called BCG. It is no longer recommended for the general population of Victoria, nor is it recommended for healthcare workers. It is only recommended for people at high risk of infection.

These people include:

• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies in high risk regions such as the Northern Territory and Far North Queensland
• babies born to parents who come from countries with a high rate of TB such as Asia, southern and eastern European countries, Pacific Island nations and north and sub-Saharan Africa
• babies born to parents with leprosy (TB and leprosy are caused by similar bacteria)
• children under five who go to live in high risk countries for long periods of time
• children under 16 who are regularly exposed to someone with active TB and who cannot be given preventative treatment.

Immunisation against TB with BCG vaccine should not be used for women who are pregnant, but can be given to women who are breastfeeding.
Speak with your doctor about whether you (or your child) need immunisation against TB.

Where to get help
- Your GP (doctor)
- Victorian Tuberculosis Program Tel (03) 9342 9478

References
- Tuberculosis notifications in Australia annual report, 2018, Department of Health, Australian Government.
- Tuberculosis, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, USA.
- Questions and answers about TB, 2014, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USA.

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Lungs

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Lung basics
- Environmental concerns
- Lung infections
- Lung conditions
- Breathing difficulty

Lung basics

- Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)
  
  CPR is a life-saving skill that everyone should learn from an accredited organisation.

- e-cigarettes
  
  What do the experts say about electronic cigarettes. Electronic cigarettes – or e-cigarettes – simulate the act of smoking, but you don’t burn tobacco when you use them.

- Pulmonary hypertension
  
  Pulmonary hypertension is high blood pressure on the lungs.

- Respiratory system
  
  The respiratory system takes up oxygen from the air we breathe and expels the unwanted carbon dioxide.

- Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)
  
  Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a potentially fatal type of pneumonia caused by a virus called SARS-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV). There is currently no cure or vaccine. Treatment.

- Smoking - effects on your body
  
  Along with nicotine, people who smoke inhale about 7,000 other chemicals in cigarette smoke. Many of these chemicals come from burning tobacco leaf. Some of these compounds are chemically active and...

- What to expect when you quit smoking
  
  When you decide to quit smoking, it can help to find out what to expect as you work through the process. Some people have only a few mild symptoms when they quit but others find it harder. While...
Aspergillus is a fungus that commonly grows on rotting vegetation. It can cause asthma symptoms.

- **Bushfire smoke**
  Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people's health.

- **Cadmium**
  Low-level exposure to cadmium over a long period of time may cause health effects because cadmium can accumulate in the body.

- **Disease clusters**
  Disease clusters are rare but can cause community concern about the possible effects of exposure to environmental hazards.

- **Passive smoking**
  Passive smoking means breathing other people's second-hand tobacco smoke. Passive smoking increases the risk of serious illness in both children and adults.

- **Smoke from planned burns**
  Bushfire smoke can reduce air quality in rural and urban areas, and may affect people’s health. Planned burns are an important part of reducing the risk of bushfires.

- **Wood fires and breathing problems**
  The smoke from wood fires can affect air quality and may affect people's health.

**Lung infections**

- **Bronchiolitis**
  Bronchiolitis is a common chest infection in babies under six months of age.

- **Chest infections**
  A chest infection affects your lungs, either in the larger airways (bronchitis) or in the smaller air sacs (pneumonia).

- **Flu (influenza)**
  Influenza (the flu) is caused by a virus. The flu is more than just a bad cold and can occasionally lead to serious complications, including death. Specific antiviral medication is available. It is...

- **Legionnaires’ disease**
  Legionnaires' disease is a rare form of pneumonia.

- **Pleurisy**
  Treating any infection of the upper respiratory tract quickly will reduce the risk of developing pleurisy.

- **Psittacosis – parrot fever**
  People who have birds as pets, poultry workers and anyone working in aviaries or pet shops, are most at risk of catching psittacosis.

- **Tuberculosis (TB)**
  Tuberculosis is spread when a person with an active infection coughs, laughs, sings or sneezes.

- **Tuberculosis treatment**
  Tuberculosis can be cured in almost all cases by taking the medications for the full course of treatment, usually at least six months.

- **Whooping cough**
  The major symptom of whooping cough is a severe cough, which is often followed by a 'whooping' sound.

- **Whooping cough – a family’s experience (video)**
  A family shares their experience when their baby daughter contracted whooping cough (or pertussis).

**Lung conditions**

- **Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease - diagnosis (video)**
  Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a serious, progressive and disabling condition that limits airflow in the lungs. Hear from individuals who have been diagnosed.

- **Cystic fibrosis (CF)**
  When a person has cystic fibrosis, their mucus glands secrete very thick sticky mucus that cloes the tiny air passages in the lungs and traps bacteria.
• Emphysema
Emphysema is generally caused by cigarette smoking or long-term exposure to certain industrial pollutants or dusts.

• Granulomatosis with polyangiitis
Granulomatosis with polyangiitis (GPA), formerly known as Wegener granulomatosis is a rare condition that targets the arteries, veins and capillaries of the kidneys and the respiratory system.

• Lung cancer
Lung cancer occurs most often in adults between the ages of 40 and 70 who have smoked cigarettes for at least 20 years.

• Lung conditions - chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is the collective term for a number of lung diseases that prevent proper breathing.

• Lymphangioleiomyomatosis (LAM)
Lymphangioleiomyomatosis (LAM) is a rare lung disease that can affect women during their reproductive years.

• Mesothelioma
Mesothelioma is a rare type of cancer that can develop decades after exposure to asbestos.

• Nontuberculous mycobacteria (NTM) lung disease
NTM lung disease is a serious disease caused by bacteria commonly found in soil and water. It can cause damage to the lungs and make people very ill.

• Pulmonary hypertension
Pulmonary hypertension is high blood pressure on the lungs.

• Sarcoidosis
Sarcoidosis is not a cancer or any other sort of malignant tumour.

• Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)
Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a potentially fatal type of pneumonia caused by a virus called SARS-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV). There is currently no cure or vaccine. Treatment...

Breathing difficulty

• Asthma explained
Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

• Choking
Don’t slap a choking person on the back while they are upright - gravity may cause the object to slip further down their windpipe.

• Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease - diagnosis (video)
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a serious, progressive and disabling condition that limits airflow in the lungs. Hear from individuals who have been diagnosed.

• Coughing and wheezing in children
Coughing and wheezing in babies can be distressing for you and your baby, but in most cases symptoms can be relieved at home.

• Croup
Croup is a viral infection of the throat and windpipe that causes noisy breathing, a hoarse voice and a harsh, barking cough.

• Pulmonary hypertension
Pulmonary hypertension is high blood pressure on the lungs.

• Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)
Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a potentially fatal type of pneumonia caused by a virus called SARS-associated coronavirus (SARS-CoV). There is currently no cure or vaccine. Treatment.

• Sleep apnoea
A person with sleep apnoea may wake hundreds of times every night.

Related Information

• Flu (influenza)
Influenza (the flu) is caused by a virus. The flu is more than just a bad cold and can occasionally lead to serious complications, including death. Specific antiviral medication is available. It is...

- **Flu (influenza) – immunisation**

  Influenza immunisation is recommended for people in known high risk groups...

- **Bird flu (avian influenza)**

  The symptoms of bird flu in humans are similar to those of regular influenza...

- **Asthma explained**

  Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives...

- **Whooping cough**

  The major symptom of whooping cough is a severe cough, which is often followed by a 'whooping' sound...

Related information on other websites

- Department of Health, Victorian Government – Infectious Diseases Epidemiology & Surveillance.
- The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne – TB - tuberculosis

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Last updated: November 2018

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- Treatment of tuberculosis
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