

## Tuberculosis

# What if I had a BCG vaccination?

Many countries outside the U.S. use bacilli BCG, or bacilli Calmette-Guerin, vaccination as part of their TB control program, especially for infants. The effectiveness of BCG vaccine varies and protection from TB disease greatly diminishes over time.

BCG can cause a false-positive reaction when using TB skin tests. TB blood tests are not affected by BCG vaccination and do not give a false-positive test result. If you have received BCG (either as a vaccine or for cancer therapy), the blood test is preferred.

## Iowa HHS Tuberculosis Program

Lucas State Office Building  
321 East 12th Street  
Des Moines, IA 50319-0075

[hhs.iowa.gov/public-health/tb](https://hhs.iowa.gov/public-health/tb)

FOR ADDITIONAL  
INFORMATION ABOUT  
TUBERCULOSIS, VISIT

- <https://www.cdc.gov/tb/>
- <https://www.lung.org>
- <https://www.thoracic.org>

Learn the facts about

# Tuberculosis (TB)



Health and  
Human Services  
Public Health



Health and  
Human Services  
Public Health

**Tuberculosis (TB)** is not just a disease of the past. Globally, TB kills more people than any other infectious disease, including HIV. Untreated TB kills one out of two victims.

## WHAT IS TB?

TB is a disease caused by bacteria (germs) which are spread from person to person through the air. TB usually affects the lungs (pulmonary TB) but it can also affect other parts of the body, such as the brain, lymph nodes or spine.

## HOW IS TB SPREAD?

TB germs are spread when a person with TB disease coughs, sneezes, speaks or sings. People who breathe in the air containing TB germs can become infected. Not everyone infected with TB bacteria becomes sick. As a result, two TB-related conditions exist: latent TB infection (LTBI) and TB disease.

## What is the difference between LTBI and TB disease?

### LTBI

People with LTBI have TB germs in their bodies but are not sick because the germs are not active. People with untreated LTBI are at risk of developing TB disease. Treatment for LTBI is strongly recommended so the TB germs will not become active and cause TB disease.

### TB DISEASE

People with TB disease are sick from TB germs that are active in their body. The symptoms of pulmonary TB disease are: a cough for more than three weeks, unexplained weight loss, fever, night sweats and fatigue. People with TB disease can

spread TB germs to others. TB disease is curable with effective treatment. Left untreated, people with TB disease can become very sick and die.

## How do you test for TB?

### SKIN TEST

A TB skin test is the most common type of TB test. It is done by injecting a small amount of fluid (tuberculin) under the skin on your arm. Your healthcare provider will check your arm 48-72 hours after the TB skin test to determine if the test result is “positive” or “negative.”

### BLOOD TESTS

Another way to test for TB is by using a special blood test. A blood test measures how your immune system reacts to the germs that cause TB. Your healthcare provider will draw blood from your arm for this test. Only one visit is required, and results are usually available in a few days.

LTBI	TB disease (pulmonary)
Positive TB test (skin or blood test)	The TB test (skin or blood) is usually positive but may be negative or indeterminate
Normal chest X-ray	Abnormal chest X-ray
No symptoms	Symptoms: cough for more than 3 weeks, unexplained weight loss, fever, night sweats and fatigue
Not contagious	May be contagious
Treatment of LTBI is recommended	Curable using antibiotics



## WHAT IF THE TB TEST IS POSITIVE?

If either the skin or blood test is positive, you are likely infected with TB germs. Your healthcare provider will order a chest X-ray to be sure the TB infection has not progressed to TB disease. If you are coughing, or the chest X-ray is abnormal, additional testing may be necessary.

## IF MY TB TEST IS POSITIVE, SHOULD I TAKE MEDICINE?

Yes, treatment is almost always recommended for people who have a positive TB test. Preferred treatment regimens for LTBI typically involve taking an antibiotic for 3-4 months. By taking antibiotics to treat LTBI, you can reduce your risk of having TB disease by 70-90% over your lifetime. It is important to take all the antibiotics to prevent progression of LTBI to TB disease.

TB disease can be treated by taking several antibiotics for 6-12 months. It is very important that people with TB disease finish their antibiotics and take them exactly as prescribed. If people stop taking antibiotics too soon, they can become sick again. If they do not take the antibiotics correctly, the germs that are still alive may become resistant to the antibiotics. The Iowa HHS, TB Control Program provides TB medications to treat LTBI and TB disease free of charge.