

Tuberculin Skin Testing for Tuberculosis

Tuberculin Skin Testing

A skin test is one way to tell if you have a tuberculosis (TB) infection. This test is given on the arm. A small needle is used to inject some testing fluid (called tuberculin) under the skin. Swelling, redness or both may develop.

You need to return to your health care provider's office within 48 to 72 hours (2 to 3 days) after the fluid is placed to have the test read.

Positive Test

A positive test is based on the size of the swelling and means you are infected with the TB bacteria. Other tests, such as a chest X-ray, may need to be done to determine if you have latent (inactive) TB or active TB disease.

Two-step Testing

Two-step testing is used to reduce the chance that a boosted reaction will be misunderstood as a recent infection. If your reaction to the first test is negative, you should have a second test 1 to 3 weeks later.

- A positive reaction to a second test is probably a boosted reaction. This means you have been exposed to a person with active TB or you received a BCG (Bacille Calmette-Guerin) vaccination* for TB infection.
- A negative reaction to a second test means you are not infected. (Any test that is positive in the future likely means you have a new TB infection.)

* BCG is a vaccination used in many countries with high rates of TB. Even if you have had a BCG shot for TB in the past, you can still receive a skin test. It may, though, cause a false positive reaction as described above.

TB blood tests are not affected by previous BCG vaccination and are preferred for those who have received a BCG vaccination.

Symptoms of TB Infection

Latent TB infection means that the TB bacteria is in your body (it is "sleeping"), but it does not mean that you are contagious (able to spread the disease). You are not sick and not contagious.

If active TB disease is in your lungs, then you may be contagious. Call your health care provider if you have any of the following symptoms, which may mean you have active TB disease and may be contagious:

- coughing that lasts longer than 3 weeks
- chest pain
- weight loss
- fever
- night sweats
- bloody phlegm
- chills.

TB bacteria can live in your body for many years without causing sickness. If someone with latent TB infection is not treated with medicine, they could become sick with TB disease. When this happens the TB bacteria could spread to others.

Follow your health care provider's directions for treatment of latent TB to help avoid active TB disease in the future.

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