

# Tuberculosis (TB)

The disease, its treatment  
and prevention

2011 Edition



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# Tuberculosis

## What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease that usually affects the lungs, although it can affect other parts of the body too.

TB is not a common disease but, over the last 20 years, the number of cases has been rising. Between 400 and 500 new cases of TB are diagnosed in Scotland every year. This is approximately one person in every 10,000 of the population.

TB is usually completely curable with a course of special antibiotics.

## How is TB spread and am I likely to get infected?

TB is usually spread when people with infectious TB in their lungs or throat cough or sneeze. However, it usually takes close and lengthy contact with an infectious person to catch the disease.

Not everyone with TB in their lungs is infectious. Once they are taking the right treatment, most people who are infectious become non-infectious after about two weeks.

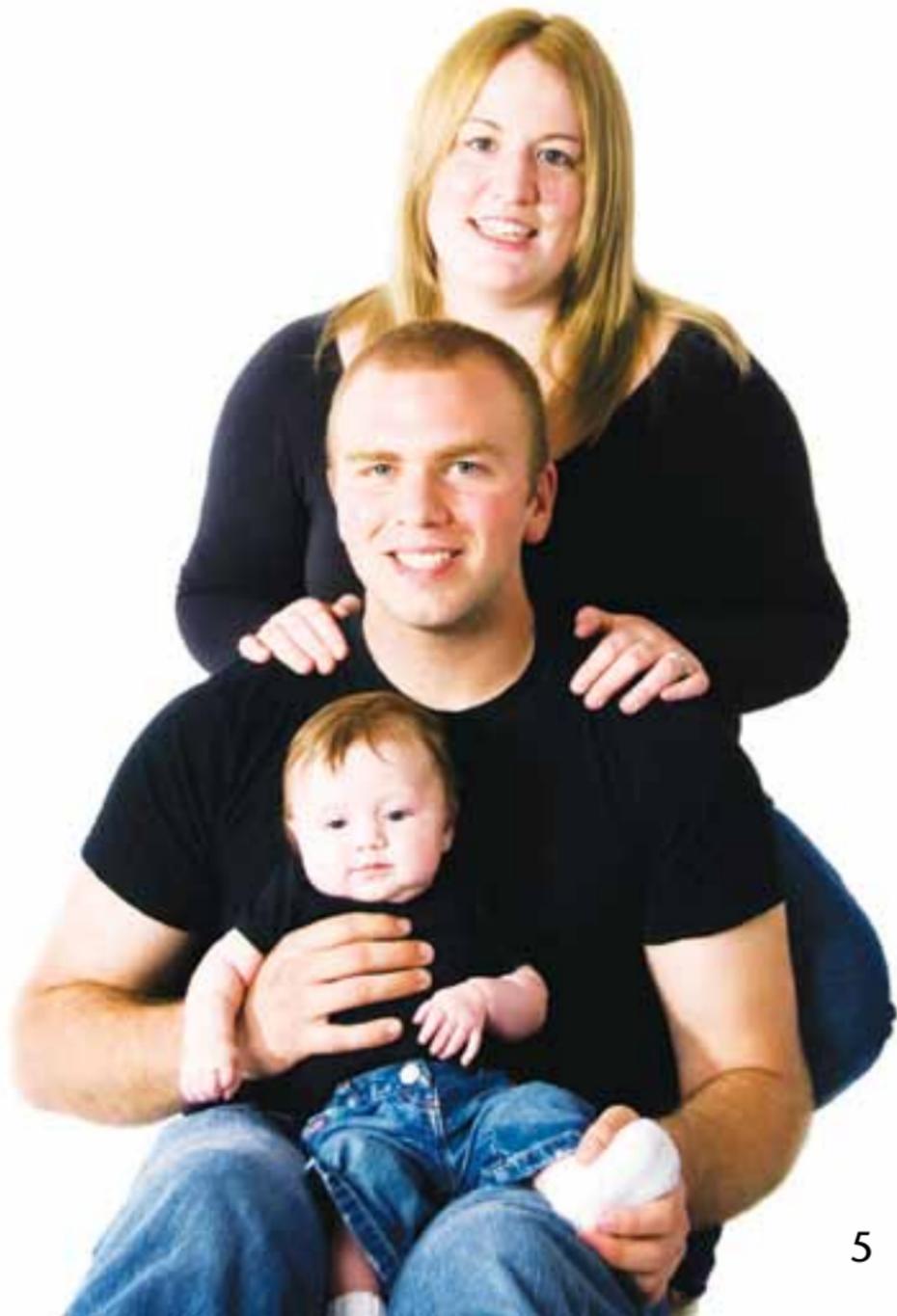
## Are some people more at risk than others?

Yes. Anyone can catch TB, but you are more at risk if you:

- live with someone who has infectious TB or have been in lengthy close contact with them
- are living in unhealthy or overcrowded conditions, are homeless or sleeping rough
- may have been exposed to TB when you were young, when TB was more common in this country
- are dependent on drugs or alcohol
- have spent a long time in a country with a high rate of TB, such as south-east Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and some countries in eastern Europe
- have parents or grandparents who come from a country which has a high rate of TB

- have been in prison
- are unable to fight infection due to illness (e.g. HIV infection) or treatment
- do not eat enough to stay healthy.

If you would like an up-to-date list of countries with a high rate of TB, please visit [www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/tb-countries](http://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/tb-countries) or ask the health professional who gave you this leaflet.



## How will I know if I've got TB?

The most common symptoms of TB include:

- a persistent moist cough that lasts for several weeks
- losing weight for no obvious reason
- fever and unusual sweats at night
- a general and unusual sense of tiredness and being unwell
- coughing up blood.

All of these symptoms may also be signs of other illnesses, but if you think you or someone else has TB you should talk to your GP or call the NHS inform helpline on 0800 22 44 88 (textphone 18001 0800 22 44 88; the helpline also provides an interpreting service).

If a health professional suspects you have TB, you will be offered a check-up at a special TB clinic.

## If I have TB, can I be cured?

Yes. TB is treated with special antibiotics. You will usually begin to feel better about two to four weeks after starting the antibiotics.

The antibiotics have to be taken for at least six months in order to cure the disease. If you stop taking the antibiotics before six months, the TB may become more serious and much more difficult to treat. You may pass on this more serious form of the infection to your family and friends.

If TB is not treated properly, it may lead to death.

## How can TB be prevented?

The most important and effective way to prevent TB spreading is to diagnose people with the disease as soon as possible and make sure they have a full course of correct treatment. That is why it is so important to be aware of the symptoms.

## I thought TB was prevented by a vaccine?

There is a vaccine called Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) that has been used for many years to help protect against TB.

BCG works best to prevent the more serious forms of TB in children when it is given from birth (if recommended).

However, the BCG vaccine does not prevent all cases of TB, so it is still important to be aware of the signs and symptoms of TB.

## Who is offered the BCG vaccine?

BCG vaccine is offered to:

- all babies born or living in areas with a high rate of TB
- infants aged 0 months to 12 months whose parents or grandparents were born in or come from a country with a high rate of TB
- previously unvaccinated children aged from one to five years of age with a parent or grandparent who was born in a country with a high rate of TB
- previously unvaccinated, tuberculin-negative children aged from six to under 16 years of age, with a parent or grandparent who was born in a country with a high rate of TB

- some close contacts of people with TB
- previously unvaccinated, susceptible children under 16 years of age who were born in or who have lived for at least three months in a country with a high rate of TB.

## Why is BCG no longer offered to secondary school children?

TB is now largely concentrated in major urban areas. Over 44% of all cases in the UK are in London and over 40% of all cases in Scotland are in Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

The highest rates are in particular risk groups, including:

- the children of those born abroad in countries with a high rate of TB
- people who have contact with others with TB
- homeless people
- people dependent on alcohol or drugs
- people with HIV.

It is now recommended that only those children at high risk are immunised, instead of offering BCG immunisation to all school children.

## I'm going abroad, do I need a BCG vaccine?

BCG may be required for previously unvaccinated, tuberculin-negative individuals depending on where they are travelling and the purpose of the visit.

The vaccine is recommended for those under 16 years old who are going to live or work with local people for more than three months in a country with a high rate of TB.

You can ask your GP for advice or call the NHS inform helpline on 0800 22 44 88 (textphone 18001 0800 22 44 88; the helpline also provides an interpreting service).

## Individuals at occupational risk

People in the following occupational groups are more likely than the general population to come into contact with someone with TB:

- healthcare workers who will have contact with patients or clinical materials
- laboratory staff who will have contact with patients or clinical materials

- veterinary staff and other animal workers, such as abattoir workers who handle animal species known to be susceptible to TB, e.g. monkeys
- prison staff working directly with prisoners
- staff of care homes for the elderly
- staff of hostels for homeless people and facilities accommodating refugees and asylum seekers.

Unvaccinated tuberculin-negative people in the above occupations who are under 35 years old are recommended to receive the BCG vaccine. However, there is no evidence that it is effective when given to adults over 35 years old.



## TB in numbers

Around two billion people (about one third of the world's population) are infected with TB, the majority of whom do not have symptoms. However, all are at risk of developing active TB (TB disease) at some time in their life.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that, across the world, around nine million people develop TB disease every year.

TB causes just over one million deaths every year worldwide. Alongside malaria and HIV, it is one of the greatest infectious disease challenges in the world today.

## TB – common concerns

Most people living in the UK will never encounter a case of TB. While it is important that people are aware of TB symptoms, and know how TB is spread and treated, it is also important that people understand the real risk to themselves and their families.

## Can you catch TB on the bus or train?

This is unlikely because you usually need to be in close contact with an infected person or persons for a long time to catch TB. Using public transport and going about your normal daily business does not put you at risk of getting TB.

## Can you catch TB at school?

If a child in school were found to have TB then a risk assessment would be carried out and appropriate screening would be organised to make sure no one else is infected and to identify the source of infection.

## TB and immigration

Over half of the people diagnosed with TB in the UK were born abroad, but immigration alone does not explain the recent rise in TB cases. Around 30 per cent of people born overseas who develop TB in the UK have lived here for over 10 years.

The most important action to safeguard public health is to ensure that all TB cases are diagnosed promptly and treated fully.

## More information

For further information on TB call the NHS inform helpline on 0800 22 44 88 (textphone 18001 0800 22 44 88; the helpline also provides an interpreting service), or contact your GP.

There is more information about TB and BCG at [www.immunisationscotland.org.uk](http://www.immunisationscotland.org.uk)

Information is also available from the following charities.

### **TB Alert**

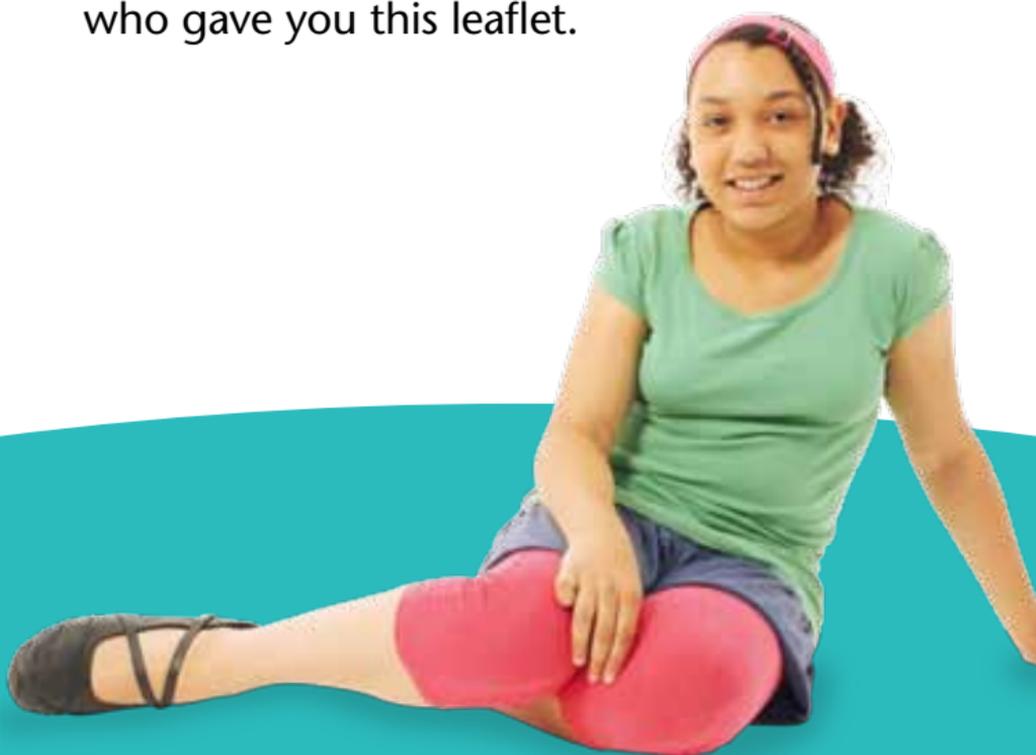
01273 234029

[www.tbalert.org](http://www.tbalert.org)

### **The Truth About TB**

[www.thetruthabouttb.org](http://www.thetruthabouttb.org)

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## Urdu

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