PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Tuberculosis (TB)

This information explains tuberculosis (TB), how it is spread, and what precautions are taken when someone has it or is being ruled out for it in the hospital.

Isolation precautions are steps we take to stop infections from spreading from person to person.

What is tuberculosis (TB)?

TB is an infection that most often affects the lungs. Other parts of the body, such as the brain, lymph nodes, kidneys, and bones, can also be infected with TB. Anyone can be infected with TB, no matter what age. People with weakened immune systems are at greater risk for TB.

All cases of TB are reported to the local or state health department. This is so health authorities can keep track of TB infections.

How is TB spread?

TB is spread through the air when a person coughs or sneezes. The germs can stay in the air for several hours. People who breathe in the air containing these germs can become infected. TB is not spread by germs on dishes, drinking glasses, or linens.

People with TB are most likely to spread the germs to people they spend a lot of time with. Family members or coworkers have the highest risk of being infected. Most often, you must spend a long time with someone before you can become infected.

What does “rule out TB” mean?

If your healthcare provider decides to test you for TB and you’re admitted to the hospital, it’s called rule out TB. During this time, the isolation precautions listed below will be taken until your test results are reviewed.

What isolation precautions are taken in the hospital?

If your healthcare provider decides to test you for TB and you’re admitted to the hospital:

- You will be placed in a private room.
- The door to your room must stay closed at all times.
- A sign will be posted on your door telling all staff to clean their hands. Either with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before going into and after leaving your room.
- All staff who enter your room must wear a respirator mask.
- If you leave your room for tests, you must wear a mask.
- You will not be able to walk around your unit. You also can’t go to these areas of the hospital:
    - Pantry on your unit
    - Pediatric recreation areas on M9
    - Cafeteria
    - Main lobby
    - Any other public area of the hospital
- Your healthcare provider will tell you to stop following precautions when:
    - Your sputum (phlegm) tests are negative for tuberculosis bacteria.
    - Your symptoms are getting better.
    - You have been taking medicine for several weeks.

Where can I get more information about TB?

If you have any questions, talk with your healthcare provider. You can also visit these websites for more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/tb

New York State Department of Health
www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/tuberculosis/fact_sheet.htm

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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