

What Head Start & Child Care Programs Should Know About Tuberculosis

What Is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a contagious disease, caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. The bacteria usually attack the lungs, but can attack any organ in the body. Recommended treatment depends on whether a person has:

- Latent TB infection— has no symptoms and can't spread the TB bacteria to others; has potential to develop active TB disease if not treated
- Active TB disease— has symptoms such as a fever, cough, weight loss; these persons may be able to spread the germ to others. Needs treatment to cure the disease.

How is TB Diagnosed?

TB infection is most commonly diagnosed by a TB skin test or TB blood test. If either of the tests is positive, additional tests are needed to see if the person has latent TB infection or active TB disease. These tests may include a chest x-ray and laboratory tests.

How does TB Spread to Others?

TB is spread in the air when a person with active TB disease of the lung or throat coughs, sneezes, or speaks. The germs can be inhaled by someone else and they become infected. TB is often spread between people who spend time together every day. TB in children usually comes from being around adults with active TB disease.

TB cannot be spread by sharing a drinking glass or eating utensils, shaking someone's hand, or touching furniture. Not everyone exposed to someone with TB disease will become infected.

Who is at Risk for TB Infection and TB Disease?

Anyone who spends time with someone with active TB disease of the lungs or throat can become infected. Many people who have latent TB infection never develop TB disease. But some people who get infected are more likely to develop TB disease. These include:

- Infants and young children.
- Having been recently infected with TB bacteria (in the last 2 years).
- Crowded environments (for example, Head Start and Child Care centers).
- Rooms with windows that don't open
- Close contacts of a person with active TB.
- Having a weakened immune system.

How can Programs Limit the Spread of Tuberculosis?

Early childhood programs that encourage staff screening and exclude active TB disease cases reduce the risk of spread.

Work with parents to make sure that children in the center are up-to-date on their EPSDT schedule and immunizations. If a case of TB is identified within a center, the child or adult should be excluded and receive further testing and medical treatment, if necessary.

Implications for Head Start and Child Care Programs

- All children and staff should be tested for TB infection if there has been an exposure to person with active TB disease within the center or at home.
- Children and staff with active TB disease should be excluded from the Head Start or child care center until treatment is started, and the doctor determines the child or staff member is no longer infectious.
- Staff absences may be a challenge to Head Start or child care providers. Absences may be related to staff illness or may be caused by worried employees who fear being exposed to TB at work. TB testing of exposed staff (by either TB skin testing or the TB blood test), and education about TB can help prevent absences from work due to fear.
- Programs should review their emergency plans and staff availability to ensure adequate coverage, if needed.

How to Talk to Children about TB

- If children have questions, take time to listen and answer their questions.
- Be honest. Answer questions based on the facts and as age-appropriate.
- Speak in a calm tone of voice, using reassuring words.
- Help parents and caregivers in keeping children updated on their immunizations and their state EPSDT schedule.

Where Can I Learn More?

- [Managing Infectious Disease in Head Start](#)
- [Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers on talking with children about infectious disease outbreaks.](#)
- [Helping early childhood programs prepare for communicable disease outbreaks or natural disasters.](#)