



If your tuberculosis skin test is positive

Your physician has given you this handout because your tuberculosis (TB) skin test was positive. This handout will discuss what it means to have a positive skin test and what you may be asked to do to avoid developing TB or passing the disease on to others.

What the skin test can and cannot do

A positive test generally means that you have the germs that cause TB somewhere in your body (usually in the lungs). It does not mean that you have active TB disease. In fact, most people with positive skin tests do not have TB because their immune system has walled off the germs.

Although the germs remain alive, they cannot cause disease. Only about 10% of people with the germs go on to develop the disease later in life.

How will I know if I have active TB disease?

Your physician will most likely conduct a physical exam and ask you about your health history. In addition, he or she will ask you to have a chest x-ray. The results of these examinations will reveal whether you have the disease. Although some people with active TB feel well, most feel tired and worn down. In addition, many develop a chronic cough, lose weight, and sweat at night. The sputum that is coughed up may contain blood. Tuberculosis can be deadly if it is not treated appropriately.

How is active TB disease treated?

It usually takes a combination of several drugs to kill the TB germs, and the drugs must be taken for many months.

It is important to take the drugs every day at the same time. Otherwise, the germs can become unresponsive to the drugs.

Recently, some cases of TB have been caused by “resistant” germs that do not respond to the drugs that are typically used. Such cases are more difficult to treat. However, in most cases, TB can be treated successfully if found early enough and treated long enough.

What if I have a positive skin test but a normal chest x-ray?

Your physician may recommend drug therapy to kill the TB germs in your body to prevent them from causing disease in the future. This treatment is known as “prophylaxis” and is done by taking a drug called isoniazid (INH for short) every day at the same time for as long as a year.



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