



Tuberculosis control in the Netherlands

What is tuberculosis

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease caused by bacteria. When the bacteria enter your body, you can develop serious infections. TB often affects the lungs. This is known as pulmonary TB and can be contagious. TB can also affect the bones, lymph nodes, vertebrae or other parts of the body. These types of TB are not contagious. TB can be successfully treated. It is rare in the Netherlands.

What are the symptoms of TB?

Symptoms of TB may include the following:

- Persistent coughing (in cases of pulmonary TB) and coughing up mucus*
- Night sweats
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Difficulty breathing

** People who have had TB for a longer period may cough up blood.*

How do you get TB?

Only people with contagious TB can infect other people. When such a person coughs or sneezes, tiny droplets are released into the air. These droplets contain the TB bacterium. Other people can become infected when they inhale the droplets.

The TB bacterium can only spread through the air.

‘Infected with tuberculosis’ or ‘ill with tuberculosis’: what is the difference?

Not everyone who is infected by the tuberculosis bacterium will actually become ill with tuberculosis. Only one out of 10 people will become ill. This may happen after a few months or not until years later. The likelihood of becoming ill after being infected is greatest in the first two years.

When the tuberculosis bacterium is present in your body but you are not ill, you are ‘infected with tuberculosis’. In this case, you are not contagious to others.

What can you do to avoid getting TB?

Vaccination

Vaccination against TB reduces your chances of becoming seriously ill. In the Netherlands, this vaccination (known as the ‘BCG vaccination’) is given only to young children who have at least one parent from a country with a high rate of TB. Certain groups of travellers may be vaccinated as well.

Testing

When someone is likely to have been infected with TB, there is a way to test for it. This usually involves a skin test (Mantoux) and/or a blood test (IGRA). Sometimes the person’s lungs are X-rayed to see if they have TB. In addition, the mucus they have coughed up can be tested in a laboratory.

Treatment for TB

Have you been infected with the TB bacterium? You can take medication to reduce your chances of becoming ill.

People who are ill with TB must be treated quickly. If you suspect that someone in your family has TB, call the Municipal Public Health Service's TB prevention department or go see your GP.

Isolation and coughing hygiene

People with contagious TB must self-isolate for two to three weeks. This is the period during which they are contagious. Isolation prevents them from infecting others. It is also important to learn how to cough and sneeze correctly. This helps prevent the spread of the disease. If you must cough or sneeze, do the following:

- Use a paper tissue. If you do not have a paper tissue at hand, cough or sneeze into the crook of your elbow or turn your face away from others.
- Throw the tissue away after use.

Who can develop TB?

Some people are at greater risk of **becoming infected** with TB:

- People who have been in the same room as someone with contagious TB
- People who have travelled to regions where TB is common, such as Africa, Asia and eastern Europe. If you are planning a trip to one of these regions, ask the Municipal Public Health Service's TB prevention department what you should do to protect yourself.

Some people are at a greater risk of **becoming ill** with TB:

- Small children (under the age of five)
- People whose immune system has been weakened by illness and people who take medication that limits their body's immune response.

Can TB be treated?

TB can be successfully treated. Your GP will prescribe medication. You must take this medication every day for at least six months. The Municipal Public Health Service will help you with this.

You must take the medication every day, and at the same time every day. Do this for as long as your GP says. This is the only way to kill all the TB bacteria. You must not stop the medication earlier than prescribed or skip any days.

The medication may have side effects such as fatigue, itching/a rash or a headache. It may give your urine, stool, sweat and/or tears an orange-reddish colour. If you wear soft contact lenses, the lenses may become permanently discoloured. This discolouration itself is not harmful. Luckily, most people do not experience these side effects. If you develop symptoms from taking the medication, contact your GP or a Municipal Public Health Service nurse.

For how long are people contagious?

When someone is being treated for contagious TB, they usually stop being contagious after two to three weeks of treatment.

The Municipal Public Health Service's TB prevention department can give you more information about the treatment for TB. You can also contact the GP who is treating you.

Can you go to work, school or a day care centre when you have TB?

When you have contagious TB, you must stay at home until you stop being contagious. Children with contagious TB should stay at home as well. The GP and the Municipal Public Health Service will tell you when it is safe to return to work, school or a day care centre.

More information

- Information about key figures: www.rivm.nl/en/tuberculosis/epidemiology-of-tuberculosis
- Information materials about tuberculosis: www.rivm.nl/en/tuberculosis/information-materials