

Health and Safety: Questions and Answers - Tuberculosis

What is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis is a highly infectious and serious disease, which is cured by a long course of medication.

Is Tuberculosis known by another name?

Yes, Tuberculosis is more commonly as TB. Tuberculosis was back in the olden days referred to as consumption.

Who gets TB?

Anyone can contract TB. In England TB has increased by 25% over the last ten years and sadly this figure is rising. Each year over 350 people die from TB related illness in England that figure reaches two million world-wide. In Around 7000 new TB cases are reported each year in the United Kingdom of which 40% is concentrated in the London areas. TB is responsible for more deaths than almost any other infectious disease.

In the UK, people who are at most risk of contracting and developing TB disease are:

- Those in close contact with a person with infectious TB;
- Those who have resided in places where TB is common;
- Those with immune systems weakened by HIV or other medical conditions;
- People who experience chronic poor health through lifestyle factors such as homelessness, alcoholism and drug abuse;
- The very elderly and young children.

How is TB spread?

The disease is passed on through the air. The bacterium attaches to tiny droplets of mucus and or saliva produced from an infected person when they talk, cough or sneeze. Most people who get TB have had a prolonged exposure to an infectious person.

ARE UNISON members at Risk?

Several groups of UNISON members are at a greater risk of contacting TB including all Health care workers (that includes bank and agency staff and locums) some Local Government, Social Services and Voluntary Sector workers whose work brings them into close contact with the disease.

What can UNISON Branches do?

- UNISON should ensure that members who are likely to be at risk are informed and offered immunisation;
- Branches can help to promote world **TB DAY March 24 and recognise** events where TB awareness is raised amongst members particularly those in health and social care and other high risk groups;
- Encourage members to ask their employers about TB awareness training, guidance and access to screening;
- Branches should also discuss with their committee structure and joint forums the issue of TB within the region and how best to inform and protect members.

What is the government doing about TB in the UK?

The government is committed to raising awareness and is in the process of developing various initiatives to combat TB in the UK.

The following groups have been identified as key workers in the community who must be informed -

- Health professionals;
- High-risk groups and people who work with them;
- Education workers
- The public.

What about my employer what will they have to do?

All infections that can be contracted by staff through their work are covered by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations. This includes the risk of catching TB. Any incidents of staff contracting TB through work must be reported to the Health and Safety Executive by the employer under the Reporting of Injuries Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations.

What does COSHH require employers to do?

Employers are required to carry out the following:

- Conduct risk assessments;
- Put in place preventative measures;
- Provide health checks for staff;
- Provide staff with information and training, and
- Keep risk assessment up to date.

What happens if the employer does not carry out COSHH requirements?

Often employers do not carry out the necessary COSHH risk assessment other than for chemicals. Subsequently a growing number are being penalised by the enforcement officers for failure to carry out proper risk assessments when there is a risk of infection by a virus or bacteria

The risk from contract with an infected person	
Nature of contact*	Risk of infection
None Known	1 in 100,000
Casual social contact	1 in 100,000
School, workplace	1 in 50 to 1 in 3
Bar, social club	Up to 1 in 10
Dormitory	1 in 5
Home	1 in 3
Nursing home	1 in 20
Source: New England Journal of Medicine 2003	

TB is increasing in the UK.