LEWIS COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

ACTIVE TUBERCULOSIS DISEASE

WHAT IS TUBERCULOSIS?

Tuberculosis (TB) is caused by a bacterium called Mycobacterium tuberculosis. The bacteria usually attack the lungs, but TB bacteria can attack any part of the body such as the kidney, spine, and brain. Not everyone infected with TB bacteria becomes sick. As a result, two TB-related conditions exist: latent TB infection (LTBI)* and TB disease. If not treated properly, TB disease can be fatal.

WHO CAN GET TUBERCULOSIS?

Anyone exposed to the tuberculosis bacteria can get tuberculosis.

WHAT ARE SYMPTOMS OF TUBERCULOSIS?

Symptoms of TB disease depend on where in the body the TB bacteria are growing. TB bacteria usually grow in the lungs (pulmonary TB). TB disease in the lungs may cause symptoms such as

- a bad cough that lasts 3 weeks or longer
- pain in the chest
- coughing up blood or sputum (phlegm from deep inside the lungs)

Other symptoms of TB disease are

- weakness or fatigue
- weight loss
- no appetite
- chills
- fever
- sweating at night

Symptoms of TB disease in other parts of the body depend on the area affected.

HOW IS TUBERCULOSIS SPREAD?

TB bacteria spread through the air from one person to another. When a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, speaks, or sings, TB bacteria can get into the air. People nearby may breathe in these bacteria and become infected.

When a person breathes in TB bacteria, the bacteria can settle in the lungs and begin to grow. From there, they can move through the blood to other parts of the body, such as the kidney, spine, and brain.

TB disease in the lungs or throat can be infectious. This means that the bacteria can spread to other people. TB in other parts of the body, such as the kidney or spine, is usually not infectious.

People with TB disease are most likely to spread it to people they spend time with every day. This includes family members, friends, and coworkers or schoolmates.

WHEN SHOULD I STAY HOME FROM WORK, SCHOOL, OR CHILDCARE?

YOU SHOULD NOT ATTEND WORK, SCHOOL, OR CHILDCARE IF ONE OF THE FOLLOWING APPLIES:

- You have been diagnosed with active tuberculosis and have not yet been released by your doctor to return to work, school, or childcare.
- You do not feel well enough to participate in regular activities.

HOW IS TUBERCULOSIS DIAGNOSED?

There are two kinds of tests used to detect TB bacteria in the body: the TB skin test (TST) and TB blood tests. A positive TB skin test or TB blood test only tells that a person has been infected with TB bacteria. It does not tell whether the person has latent TB infection (LTBI)* or has progressed to TB disease. Other tests, such as a chest x-ray and a sample of sputum, are needed to see whether the person has TB disease.

HOW IS TUBERCULOSIS TREATED?

There are several treatment regimens recommended in the United States for TB disease. TB treatment can take 4, 6, or 9 months depending on the regimen.

HOW CAN I HELP PREVENT TUBERCULOSIS?

In many countries, TB is much more common than in the United States. Travelers should avoid close contact or prolonged time with known TB patients in crowded, enclosed environments (for example, clinics, hospitals, prisons, or homeless shelters).

Air travel itself carries a relatively low risk of infection with TB of any kind. Travelers who will be working in clinics, hospitals, or other health care settings where TB patients are likely to be encountered should consult infection control or occupational health experts. They should ask about administrative and environmental procedures for preventing exposure to TB. Once those procedures are implemented, additional measures could include using personal respiratory protective devices.

Travelers who anticipate possible prolonged exposure to people with TB (for example, those who expect to come in contact routinely with clinic, hospital, prison, or homeless shelter populations) should have a TB skin test or a TB blood test before leaving the United States. If the test reaction is negative, they should have a repeat test 8 to 10 weeks after returning to the United States. Additionally, annual testing may be recommended for those who anticipate repeated or prolonged exposure or an extended stay over a period of years. Persons, who test positive for TB or who are exposed to TB, who are also immune suppressed (have HIV, on cancer chemotherapy, on immune suppressive therapy for organ transplant or for autoimmune diseases) are at greater risk of developing TB disease due to an impaired immune response.

Tuberculosis is a Washington State reportable disease and must be reported to your local health department in Lewis County, contact Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response at 360-740-1223 during business hours or 360-740-1105 after hours and ask to speak with the health officer.

*See separate info sheet on LTBI.