BCG and tuberculosis

immunisation
THE SAFEST WAY TO PROTECT YOUR CHILD
BCG and tuberculosis

This leaflet explains what tuberculosis is – and why BCG is an important immunisation.

What is BCG?

The BCG injection is a vaccine which contains a very weak form of the germ which causes tuberculosis – more commonly known as TB. The vaccine doesn't cause TB, but it stimulates the body to start building up immunity, so it can fight the disease.

What is TB?

TB is an infection which usually affects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body such as the bones or the brain. TB of the lungs is the most common type of TB found in the UK.

How can you catch TB?

You can catch TB from someone who is already infected. The infection can be spread by coughing. Coughing produces tiny droplets of saliva containing germs (bacteria) which can stay in the air for long periods of time. If you breathe in the germs it can cause the infection.

Do a lot of people catch TB?

Only a small number of people in the UK still get TB. The numbers are small because:
- generally we have good living conditions;
- we can treat people with the disease quickly; and
- levels of immunisation are high.

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of people with TB in the UK. Around the world, the number of people catching and dying from TB is much higher: and is increasing quite quickly in many countries.

How does TB make you ill?

TB usually begins as a small inflamed area in one lung. This inflamed area then grow and if it's not stopped in time it spreads to the other lung. Symptoms which then develop are:
- a cough which can last for weeks;
- a fever;
- sweating – especially at night;
- weight loss;
- feeling tired; and
- sometimes spitting up blood.

Sometimes TB can kill you if it's not treated in time. However, death is rare because the drugs used to treat it are very effective.

How does the body fight TB?

If you catch TB, your body needs to recognise the bacteria as an enemy. The body's immune system will start making antibodies which attack the bacteria and fight the disease. If you have the BCG vaccination, it prepares your body to start fighting the disease.

Who needs to be immunised?

People are only given a BCG injection if it's necessary. To check this, a nurse or doctor will carry out a skin test called the 'tuberculin' or 'Heaf' test. This skin test shows whether or not you are already immune to TB. You may be immune if you have been infected with TB and you did not know about it, or you may have already been immunised.

The tuberculin or Heaf test

When you go for the skin test a small amount of solution is spread on your forearm and a throw-away device with six tiny needles is pressed onto your skin on top of the solution. About a week later the nurse or doctor looks at the test area to check the reaction. If the test area has become red, raised and hard, you are already immune. This means you will not need the BCG
injection. The redness and hardness goes away after a while but you might get a tiny scar. If your skin does not react, you are not immune to TB and you will need a BCG injection. If you have a very strong reaction to the test, you will have another check and you may need to take some medicine to prevent TB developing.

What happens after immunisation?

You will normally be given the vaccine as an injection in the upper part of the left arm, (it can be given in the thigh). Within two to six weeks of the injection a small spot will appear which may feel quite sore for a few days. If there is a more severe reaction, or an infection, you may need antibiotics to treat this. It's fine to have a bath or shower as normal and go swimming after having the injection. The sore area will gradually heal up, especially if you do not cover it up. You may be left with a small scar.

Remember, prevention is simple, but treating TB can take a long time.

If you want more information on TB, BCG or any other immunisations, speak to the school nurse or your own doctor or nurse.