TUBERCULOSIS

What is it?

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infection caused by a bacterium called Mycobacterium Tuberculosis.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of TB are extremely varies and usually depend upon which part of the body is affected. Symptoms which can occur with TB are fever and loss of weight. TB of the lung (pulmonary TB) can give symptoms of cough with phlegm (sometimes with blood in it), breathlessness, fever and loss of appetite and weight. TB of the lymph glands will cause enlargement of the glands. TB affecting other parts of the body (most commonly the kidneys, pelvis, bones or joints) will have different symptoms depending on the area of the body affected. Remember that most people with these symptoms will not have TB which is quite a rare disease in the UK.

Is it infectious?

Yes, if it is TB of the lung. This is spread by infected phlegm (sputum). TB of the lung is not infectious after 2 weeks when an infected person has started on treatment. The other types of TB are not infectious. TB is not usually spread by children before puberty.

What is the incubation period?

It is usually between 4 and 12 weeks when there is a primary lesion (sore) in the lung, or a positive test.

Is there any treatment?

Yes. Most people are completely cured by a course of antibiotics. Usually 3 or 4 antibiotics have to be taken together for a course of at least 6 months. It is very important that someone taking these tablets should finish the course.

Can TB be prevented?

Yes. TB is a rare disease in this country but is more common in some other countries of the world, especially in the Indian subcontinent and Africa. BCG vaccination should be given to children born to parents who originate from countries where TB is more common than in Britain and to teenagers in some districts. TB is also more common in people who are immunosuppressed, eg people with AIDS, or whose living conditions are poor, eg homeless or low income families living in overcrowded homes. People who have been in close contact (usually a household contact) with a person who has been diagnosed with TB of the lung will have to attend their own doctor or the TB clinic. They will be tested for TB and may also require a course of antibiotic tablets.

How soon can someone return to school or work?

People with TB of the lung can return once they have taken two weeks of treatment. People with other types of TB can return as soon as they feel well.