

# Tuberculosis (TB) Skin Test

## What is a tuberculosis skin test?

The tuberculosis skin test is a test that can show if you have been infected with tuberculosis (TB) bacteria. The test is called the Mantoux tuberculin skin test (TST). Another name is PPD (purified protein derivative).

## Why is this test done?

TB usually causes lung disease, although it can affect almost any part of the body. TB infections are no longer common in the US. However, an active TB infection can be a very serious illness. The TB skin test can find most TB infections before the infection is serious enough to cause any problems.

Most people who are infected with TB bacteria have a form of infection called latent or inactive TB. They usually do not develop active TB, which means that they have no signs or symptoms of illness. Their body's defenses control the infection by building a wall around the bacteria. This doesn't get rid of the bacteria, but the bacteria stop growing. If you have latent TB and become weak or ill, or your immune system stops working well, the TB bacteria can become active. The bacteria can then multiply and you may get sick.

If the test finds that you have TB bacteria, you can be treated with medicine that will keep you from having an active infection and getting sick. The medicine will also keep the infection from spreading to others.

You should get tested for TB if you:

- Have been in close contact with someone known or suspected to have TB
- Have HIV infection or another condition that weakens the immune system and puts them at high risk for active TB disease
- Have symptoms of active TB disease
- Live or work where active TB disease is more common, such as a homeless shelter, migrant farm camp, prison or jail, or some nursing homes
- Are from a country where active TB disease is very common (most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Russia)
- Inject illegal drugs

## How do I prepare for this test?

Usually no preparation is needed for this test. Just be sure you can come back to have your skin checked in 48 to 72 hours. Otherwise you will need to repeat the test.

Talk to your healthcare provider if you have any questions about the test.

## **How is the test done?**

Your healthcare provider will use a needle to inject a small amount of fluid into the top layer of your skin. The fluid contains protein from the tuberculosis bacteria. It is like getting a shot.

Your healthcare provider will want you to come back to the office in 2 to 3 days to check the area that was injected.

A 2-step test method is used for older people because they may have a poorer immune response. If the first test is negative, the test is repeated in 7 to 10 days.

## **What does the test result mean?**

If after 2 or 3 days you have a red, raised, firm area around the test site, then you have probably been infected with TB. The lump will be measured to see if it is large enough to be seen as a positive result. A positive result does not necessarily mean you have an active TB infection. Most people with positive tuberculin tests don't have active TB. A positive test without active disease simply means that sometime in the past you were exposed and infected with TB, but your body's immune system is keeping the bacteria under control.

If you are not infected, there may be no reaction in the area of the injection. This is a negative result. You may also have no reaction if you were just recently infected (in the last 6 weeks).

Sometimes it takes longer than 3 days for the skin to show a reaction. If your 3-day check was normal, be sure to tell your provider if any redness appears after the first 3 days. Your provider will decide if the redness is from a TB infection or some other cause.

Sometimes the test may give a false-positive or false-negative result. This means that the skin may show a reaction even though you are not infected (false positive), or there is no reaction even though you are infected (false negative).

This test does not tell whether the infection is latent or active. Other tests, such as a chest X-ray and a sample of sputum, are needed to see if the infection is an active disease.

Many people born outside of the US have been vaccinated against TB with the BCG (Bacillus Calmette-Guérin) vaccine. This vaccine is not routinely given in the U.S. It may cause the skin to have a reaction after a TB skin test so that it looks like you have or had TB even when you do not. If you have had the BCG vaccine, be sure to tell your healthcare provider.

## **What if the test result is not normal?**

If the test is positive, close family members should also have the test.

Test results are only one part of a larger picture that takes into account your medical history, physical exam, and current health. Sometimes a test needs to be repeated to check the first result. Talk to your healthcare provider about your result and ask questions such as:

- If you need more tests
- What kind of treatment you might need
- When you need to be tested again
- What lifestyle, diet, or other changes you might need to make

Talk to your healthcare provider if you have any questions about the test.

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