

TAG

Treatment Action Group

IMPAACT4TB 
PREVENTING TB TO END TB

After Tuberculosis Exposure:

TIPS FOR PROTECTING YOURSELF AND THE PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE

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**2024
edition**





Tuberculosis (TB) is a common, preventable, and curable disease that is caused by a germ spread through the air. Ten million people become sick from TB each year around the world. When people share the same air — from living together, working together, or doing other things together — the TB germ can spread. TB germs get into the air when someone who has active TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, speaks, or sings. Anyone who breathes in the air containing the TB germs may also get TB.



What can I expect if I am exposed to TB?

Hearing you have been exposed to TB can be a scary experience. You may hear this news from a healthcare worker at the clinic, from a family member or friend, or from someone who has just been diagnosed with TB. Hearing this news may make you feel afraid, sad, angry, or worried. The most important thing is to take comfort in the following facts:

- Remember that TB is common, preventable, and completely curable, especially if the diagnosis is made early.
- For this reason, it is important to get tested for TB as soon as possible after you learn you've been exposed.
- Contact your local clinic or healthcare professional for guidance on TB screening and testing. It's important to get tested for TB even if you don't feel sick, as many people do not show symptoms after exposure.
- If you are exposed to TB but are not sick, there are things you can do to make sure you stay healthy, including something called preventive treatment.
- **TB preventive treatment** is a medication regimen that you can take after TB exposure to decrease the chance of becoming sick.

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While TB is common and completely curable, the sooner the TB diagnosis is made, the more likely the treatment will be successful. So while it is normal to feel scared, it is important to be prepared! Going to the clinic to have your health checked is the first step.

What should I do after I find out I have been exposed to TB?

There are several important things you can do if you find out you have been exposed to TB.

- **Be respectful to the person who has shared this information with you.** It can be upsetting when someone tells you that you have been exposed to the TB germ. Your first reaction may include blaming the person with TB for possibly giving you TB.

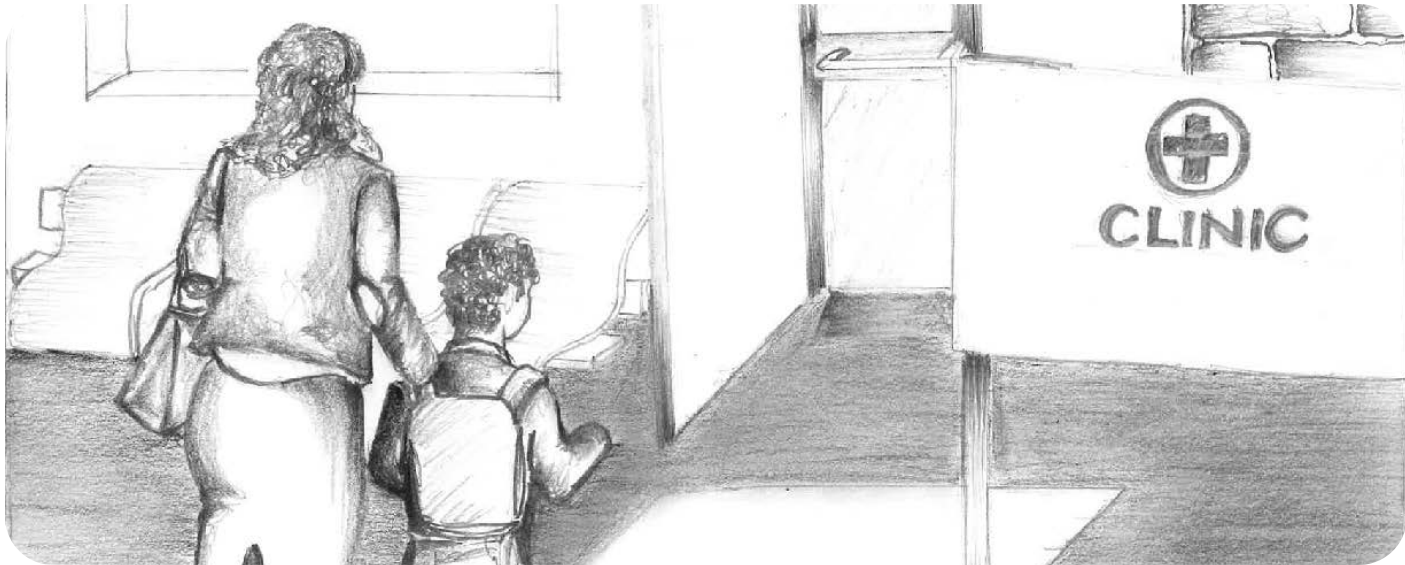
Rather than react, try to acknowledge the person who shared the news with you in a respectful manner. Sharing such news is never easy for a person with TB. Remember, we all breathe, and therefore we are all at potential risk of being exposed to TB. By sharing their news, the person with TB is taking responsibility and allowing you to find out about your health.

There is no need to stay away from the person who has given you the news if they are on treatment: the exposure likely happened in the past and is usually not an ongoing issue.



- **Plan to go to the clinic to be examined for TB.** In most places, testing and treatment for TB is completely free in the public sector, and you should not be charged for TB services. If it is difficult for you to get to the clinic, work with your community and support networks to come up with a plan. In some places, healthcare workers may be able to come to your location to evaluate you for TB.

Once at the clinic, let the healthcare workers know that you are there because you have been exposed to TB and would like to be tested for TB and to find out about preventive treatment. They will then help you follow the next steps.



What can I expect at the clinic?

While each clinic is different, there are some common things that should happen for all people who have been exposed to TB. Some things you can expect at the clinic are:

- You will be asked questions about your health and any symptoms you might have, such as weight loss, fever, cough, or sweating. It is important to let the healthcare workers know about any symptoms or body changes that you might be experiencing. They will also ask about other health conditions you might have, since these may increase your risk of TB.
- You will be examined by a healthcare worker.
- You will have your weight checked.

It is important to let the healthcare workers know about any symptoms or body changes that you might be experiencing. They will also ask about other health conditions you might have, since these may increase your risk of TB.

- If you can produce sputum, the clinic might ask you to give them a sample so they can look for the TB germ there. Producing sputum is not easy for everyone. The healthcare workers helping you will show you how to produce a good sputum sample. This may take a few tries, so be prepared to do a bit of work.
- You may also be asked for a sample of your urine or even for a sample of your stool. If you are there with a child, they might also ask for these samples from the child as well. If they do, make sure they give you containers for the sample and good instructions about how to collect the sample and where to bring it after it has been collected.

- You may have a chest X-ray picture taken of your lungs or other parts of your body to look for TB. Not everyone will need an X-ray, but if they recommend one to you and you need help or support to get it done, you should let the clinic team know.
- You should be offered an HIV test and counselling, since knowing this information can help the clinic team decide what to do next. This test should also be offered to you at no cost. If they do not offer you the service, you should request it. This is another piece of information that you can then use to stay healthy.
- You should ask about other health concerns or issues that you may have while you are at the clinic — being checked for other medical problems is a great way to take charge of your health.

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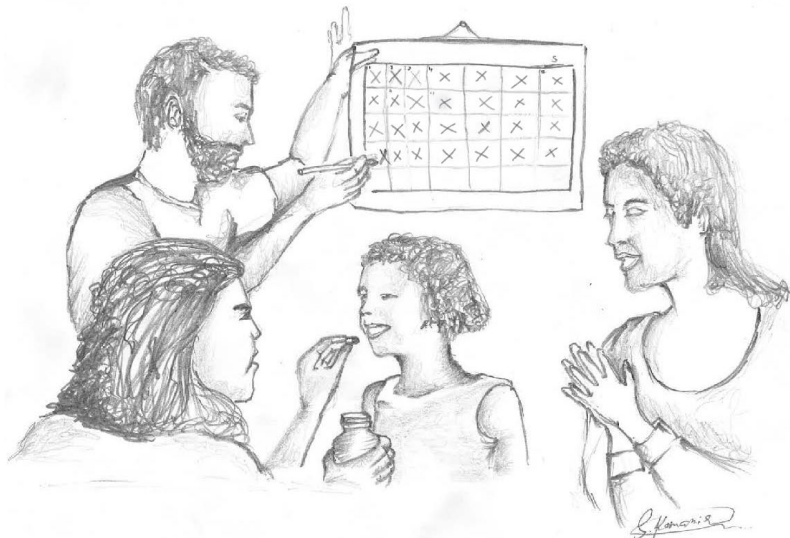
What will the clinic do for me next?

- The healthcare workers will review your results and will decide if you need treatment for TB. Sometimes they may need to do more testing or have you come back for additional visits. Remember to ask questions if you do not understand the processes or why you are being asked to undertake further tests. Let the healthcare workers know when you need additional support.
- If the healthcare workers think you have TB, they will start you on treatment. Treatment usually lasts for four to six months and cures most people with TB. You should receive counseling and information about your treatment and how best to take it, including any online or community support groups for people with TB.
- Sometimes after TB exposure, a small amount of the TB germ can hide in the lungs. It may not make you sick at first, but a few weeks, months, or even years later, the germs can become more active and make you sick. This happens more commonly in young children and in people who have other health problems. The clinic may offer you medication called **TB preventive treatment** to get rid of this TB germ.

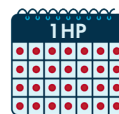
The healthcare workers will review your results and will decide if you need either treatment for TB disease or preventive treatment to protect you from developing TB.

What is TB preventive treatment?

- TB preventive treatment, sometimes called TPT, helps people who have been exposed to TB but who are not yet sick from getting active TB disease.
- There are several different preventive treatment regimens that the clinic may offer you, and they usually consist of two different medicines called isoniazid and rifapentine. One of the regimens is given every day for a total of four weeks and is called **1HP**. Another regimen called **3HP** is given once a week for a total of 12 weeks.



The 3HP regimen: rifapentine and isoniazid taken once a week for 12 weeks (three months).



The 1HP regimen: rifapentine and isoniazid taken daily for four weeks (one month)

- Some people cannot take rifapentine and may instead be offered two medicines called isoniazid and rifampicin. This treatment is given daily for a total of three months and is known as 3HR. Some people can only take isoniazid and if so, they will be offered this treatment daily for six to nine months (this is sometimes called 6H or 9H).

- If you are on preventive treatment, it is important to take the medicine until you complete it. It is also important to follow the instructions provided by the healthcare workers on how and when to take this medication.
- The healthcare workers will provide a comprehensive explanation about your preventive treatment and what to expect from the medications in terms of the side effects and the diet you should follow.
- Most people who take TB preventive treatment can take the medicines easily without many side effects. When side effects do occur, they are usually mild and go away quickly. But if you feel unwell or have major side effects when taking preventive treatment tell a healthcare worker right away.

If you are on preventive treatment, it is important to take the medicine until you complete it.

- If you are not offered TPT after TB exposure, you should ask the healthcare workers about it. It is your right to receive this treatment, and in most places, it should be offered to you for free.
- The clinic should offer you regular follow-up after TB exposure so that you can continue to be checked for TB. It is important to set your next appointment date with the healthcare providers while you are being checked after TB exposure.

Who can I talk to if I have questions about TB?

- After a TB exposure, you may have many questions about your health and about TB. It is important to identify trusted sources of information about TB so you can receive factual and helpful information.
- Many health centers or clinics have TB counsellors or community health workers who are available to answer questions, so ask if such a person is available to talk to you.
- The internet or other electronic resources can be powerful tools for information, but be sure to use sites that are verified. Many untruths and rumors about TB are spread online, and they can provoke fear or lead to harmful consequences. Your clinic can help you decide what sources of information are trustworthy. They may also connect you to a helpline or online support group, where you can receive additional information from peers.
- Remember that TB is a preventable and curable disease! Exposure can be scary, but there are things you can do after exposure to reduce your risks. Everybody breathes, and thus TB is part of life. Learning you have been exposed to TB is an opportunity for you to take the necessary steps to focus on your health.





The information contained in this guide was developed by a group of TB experts, survivors, and advocates using participatory methods to generate community-informed materials. These included the use of open-ended interviews with people in the community of Khayelitsha, South Africa, who were diagnosed with TB and open-ended interviews with their close contacts.

The illustrations were drawn by a South African artist named Samkelo and first appeared in a counseling guide used at the former MSF clinic in Khayelitsha.