

## BACKGROUND

---

**Created:** January 11, 2007

**Last Update:** January 6, 2011

### TUBERCULOSIS AND THE PORT ALBERNI OUTBREAK

Since May 2006, more than 4,400 individuals in the Port Alberni area of Vancouver Island have been screened for tuberculosis (TB), and 48 cases of active TB have been reported. An outbreak was declared for the area in October 2006, as it was experiencing over twice the average number of cases reported for central Vancouver Island, which is typically five TB cases per year.

The Vancouver Island Health Authority continues to work closely with the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council, local physicians and public health nurses to manage and monitor the situation. Most cases occurring in this outbreak have not been considered highly contagious. All persons with active TB are on supervised treatment. So far, all cases have had easily recognized household, work or social contact with another person known to have active TB. People outside of this close group of contacts are unlikely to be affected by this outbreak.

Public Health Nurses from VIHA and the Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council continue to test named contacts, as well as higher risk populations such as those with poor living conditions and addictions who are often associated with TB. In addition to this, location-based testing is being offered to relevant work and social contacts. The risk to other residents of Port Alberni is low.

#### **TB INFECTION IS NOT THE SAME AS TB DISEASE**

Most of the time, when someone inhales TB germs, their body stops the germs from growing or spreading to other parts of their body. They have what is called **latent TB infection**; they do not have **TB disease**. In a couple of months, their TB skin test will be positive, but they will feel fine and are *not infectious*.

In **latent TB infection**, the germs are not dead, only suppressed. If the body's defenses become weak in the future, the infection may reactivate and develop into TB disease. This is why people with latent TB infection often are given TB medication – to kill the germs before they can cause disease. This is called “preventative treatment”.

**TB disease** occurs when TB germs activate and cause damage to the lungs or other parts of the body. Typical symptoms include loss of appetite, weight loss, fatigue, fever and night sweats, plus symptoms specific to the affected part of the body (e.g. coughing if the lungs are involved). *TB of the lungs or larynx is contagious to varying degrees*, but TB affecting other parts of the body is generally not spread from person to person.

#### **MOST PEOPLE WHO HAVE A POSITIVE TB SKIN TEST DON'T HAVE TB DISEASE AND CAN NOT SPREAD TB GERMS TO OTHERS**

The test for TB is a very simple skin test and takes just a few minutes. It is free of charge to those who are suspected contacts. Most people who have a positive skin test either have latent TB infection or have had BCG (an immunization against TB) in the past. Neither group is capable of spreading TB. Some

people with positive skin tests will have active TB disease but they will be assessed and put on treatment quickly.

**AFTER SOMEONE WITH TB DISEASE HAS BEEN ON MEDICATION FOR A WHILE, THEY ARE NO LONGER INFECTIOUS**

TB is curable and the treatment is free of charge. Any new cases of TB disease are checked to see how infectious they are. If the disease is affecting their lungs they will be placed in isolation either in their home or in hospital, depending on the severity of the infection. As the treatment begins to work, coughing decreases and fewer germs are found in the sputum (spit). After a period of time the person will no longer be infectious and can finish their treatment without isolation precautions.

**IF SOMEONE IS ON TREATMENT FOR TB INFECTION OR TB DISEASE, IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT THEY FINISH THE TREATMENT AND FOLLOW MEDICAL ADVICE PERTAINING TO THAT TREATMENT**

TB germs can quickly develop resistance to antibiotics. This is why TB treatment involves taking several antibiotics at once. In some parts of the world, TB has developed resistance to every antibiotic known to man. We don't want that to happen in BC, so it is very important that anyone on treatment take their medication as directed and finish the entire treatment course unless directed to do otherwise by their doctor.

TB medications are strong and sometimes the treatment needs to be altered due to side effects. People on treatment need to tell their doctor or public health nurse about any concerns they have with their medication. Also it is important to have any lab tests that are recommended done on time.

For more information about TB, call HealthLink BC 24 hours every day at 8-1-1, contact a family physician or visit these web links:

- o <http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile51a.stm>
- o <http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile51b.stm>

Residents in Port Alberni may also call the Port Alberni Health Unit at 250-731-1322.

- 30 -

**Media Contact:**

Anya Nimmon  
Vancouver Island Health Authority  
Nanaimo  
250-740-6980