

AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF BOZEN / BOLZANO – SOUTH TYROL
SOUTH TYROL HEALTH AUTHORITY

BOZEN / BOLZANO HEALTH DISTRICT
Occupational Pneumological Department

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INFORMATION SHEET ON TUBERCULOSIS

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis is an infection caused by bacilli.

It above all affects the lungs, but also other organs such as the kidneys, meninges, lymph nodes and bones. The illness nowadays above all affects older people, but can occur at any age, particularly in the event of even a temporary weakening of the immune system.

How does infection occur?

The infection almost always occurs via the inhalation of bacillus-carrying, very small droplets of saliva discharged by the infected person when coughing, speaking, etc. Tuberculosis bacilli cannot be transferred via items such as clothing, blankets, cups, etc. The inhaled bacilli travel via the respiratory system into the lungs, where they first cause a small, usually symptom-free infection that normally heals spontaneously. After this “first infection”, inactive, sleeping bacilli may remain in the body for many years, controlled by the immune system. In particular cases (e.g. a weakening of the immune system), tuberculosis may develop as an illness many years after the first contact.

What are the symptoms of tuberculosis?

This depends on the affected organ. As tuberculosis mostly strikes the lungs, however, the following symptoms may occur:

- persistent coughing (over weeks and months)
- slight temperature, particularly in the afternoon
- night sweats
- coughing up blood
- weakness and tiredness
- loss of appetite
- loss of weight

How can tuberculosis be treated?

Although tuberculosis, if left untreated, is a severe and dangerous illness, proper treatment nowadays gives very good prospects for recovery.

With the exception of the most severe and infectious cases, treatment can be carried out at home.

Treatment lasts at least 6 months. With occasional exceptions, drugs are taken in the form of tablets. For slight and non-infectious cases, patients can continue to work during treatment after an initial period of convalescence. In the most severe and infectious cases the inability to work may last several months.

It is extremely important that the doctor's instructions are fully obeyed during treatment. If the therapy is arbitrarily changed or not taken regularly, the bacilli may become resistant so that the therapy is no longer effective and recovery is delayed or made more difficult.

How can tuberculosis be prevented?

The most important preventive measure consists in identifying and treating the sources of infection as early as possible and thus removing the risk of infection.

Persistent coughing and the above symptoms should therefore always be examined by a specialist.

It is also important in the event of a case of tuberculosis that those persons who have been in close contact with the infected person should be examined (tuberculin test, thorax X-ray) in order to promptly identify any infection and take measures to prevent the illness.

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