

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Response to Community Concerns About Active Tuberculosis (TB) Disease Among the Homeless

Is the ongoing outbreak of TB a threat to the general public?

The ongoing outbreak of TB is not a threat to the general public. It is most often found among persons who are homeless or were recently homeless. In addition, the strain of the TB germ in this ongoing outbreak has shown it can be effectively treated with medications used to successfully treat TB.

What is TB?

TB is caused by germs called bacteria and usually affects the lungs. It can be cured with prescription medicine given by a health care provider.

There are two kinds of TB. The first, called TB infection, means a person has "sleeping" (inactive) TB germs in their body and cannot infect anyone else. These germs live in the body without making the person sick. If these TB germs "wake up" (become active), they can lead to the second kind of TB, called active TB disease. A person with active TB disease is sick and can infect other people.

Why are homeless people more likely to get TB?

Anyone can get TB; however, a person's natural defense system is weakened when they are in stressful living situations, have a poor diet, or are sick with other diseases. Homeless individuals often live in crowded living conditions, making the spread of TB more likely.

What is being done to reduce the outbreak of TB?

Public Health is working with homeless shelters, community advocates and medical providers, the State of California TB Control Program, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to limit the spread of TB and to identify and treat those with TB infection (which is not communicable to others) and those with active TB disease. Actions are being undertaken to:

- Identify persons with active TB disease for isolation and treatment
- Identify persons with TB infection and treat them
- Work with shelter staff on TB prevention and control
- Implement TB screening in shelters and elsewhere as necessary to prevent active TB disease
- Develop a comprehensive data system to monitor and track all clients.

What are the signs and symptoms of Active TB?

Signs and symptoms of active TB disease include:

- A bad cough that lasts 2 to 3 weeks or longer
- Unexplained weight loss
- Fever
- Chills
- Sweating at night
- Pain in the chest
- Weakness/fatigue
- Decreased appetite
- Coughing up blood or mucus

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Response to Community Concerns About Active Tuberculosis (TB) Disease Among the Homeless | March 4, 2013

How is TB spread?

TB germs are spread through the air when a person with active TB disease coughs, sneezes, speaks, sings, or laughs and someone close by breathes in the TB germs. TB is not spread from clothes, dishes, food, body contact, or passing someone on the street. The spread of TB is usually associated with long or repeated close contact with a person with active TB disease.

Is there an increased risk of getting TB for people who visit, work or live in the downtown Los Angeles area or Skid Row?

Persons who simply visit, live or work in the downtown or Skid Row areas are not at increased risk of contracting TB.

Are there any special precautions people working or volunteering with the homeless population should take?

People working or volunteering directly with the homeless population may be at slightly increased risk of exposure to TB due to the potential for contact with persons with active TB disease. People who work in certain occupations should be at least screened annually for TB infection. These workers and volunteers include health care professionals, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), police and shelter workers. Individuals with a positive screening test should be evaluated by a health care provider for TB and treated appropriately.

Persons working with the homeless population should be aware of the signs and symptoms of active TB disease described above. If workers or volunteers identify a client who shows signs of active TB disease, they should immediately provide the client with tissues and ask the client to cover his/her nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. As soon as possible, the client should be given a surgical mask and instructed to place it over both the mouth and nose area. All persons showing signs of active TB disease should be separated from other clients and promptly referred for medical evaluation.

Masks for workers are only needed for those workers who are actually attending to persons who have active TB disease. Preventing the spread of TB germs is better accomplished through covering coughs and providing a mask to any person with symptoms of TB. It should be remembered that most people who are coughing do not have TB disease since it is more likely they will have other more common respiratory diseases such as a cold or influenza.

What should people do if they think they have been exposed to active TB disease?

People who think they were exposed to someone with active TB disease should contact their health care provider or the local health department to determine if testing is needed:

www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/tb/TBTesting.htm.