

TB Risk for Medical Travelers

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

Tuberculosis Infection Risk

- Tuberculosis (TB) is a leading cause of death worldwide.
- Global incidence peaked around 2003 and seems to be dropping slowly
- In 2020, 9.9 million individuals became ill with TB and 1.5 million died according to the World Health Organization (WHO).
- Over 95% of TB cases occur in resource-limited countries.
- There is an increasing concern about drug resistant TB in many parts of the world.

It is important that you understand your risk of TB infection while working or traveling abroad. A personalized risk assessment should be discussed with your healthcare provider. While there is limited data on the risk of TB infection in travelers and those working in health care settings in TB-endemic countries, you may be at significantly higher risk depending on where you are traveling, how long you are staying, and what types of activities you will be doing.

TB exposure and infection

In TB endemic countries, TB can be found anywhere. Patients with active TB cough the bacteria into the air and if you inhale the bacteria, you may become infected. If this occurs, you will not develop any symptoms but within 8 -12 weeks, your skin test or blood test will show that you have latent TB infection (LTBI). Your risk of infection may be higher if you spend a long time in an enclosed area with

someone who has active TB and has not started treatment.

Strategies for minimizing exposure

- If you are a healthcare worker or student caring for patients, inquire about infection control strategies in use at the site you are traveling to
- Encourage infectious patients to wear a surgical mask and use good cough hygiene.
- If available, wear TB masks/respirators to provide some protection-though not 100% effective
- Encourage people with cough > 2 weeks, fevers, night sweats, or poor appetite to seek medical attention and be evaluated for TB.

Effective treatment for TB renders patients non-infectious, usually within a few weeks.

Importance of pre-travel and post-travel testing for TB

Testing for latent TB infection is easy and relatively painless. It involves either a skin test or blood test. Ideally, you should have a test prior to your travel, but more importantly, you should get tested about 8 -10 weeks after you return home. If your test is positive, your health care provider may offer you medication to reduce your risk of developing active TB in the future. You can get a test for TB infection from your primary care provider or Brown

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series: TB Risk for Medical Travelers

www.brown.edu/health 401-863-3953

(last updated 7/22)

University Health Services.

Brown University Health Services will remind you to get your post travel TB test 8-10 weeks after you return from your trip. To take advantage of this service, call 401-863-3953 and ask to speak to a Registered Nurse (RN).

Signs and symptoms of active TB

Most people with active TB will experience some combination of these symptoms: prolonged fever, night sweats, cough, swollen lymph nodes, decreased appetite or weight loss. **If you experience any of these symptoms after you return home**, you should seek medical care and ask your health care provider about the possibility of TB.

Source: UpToDate.com