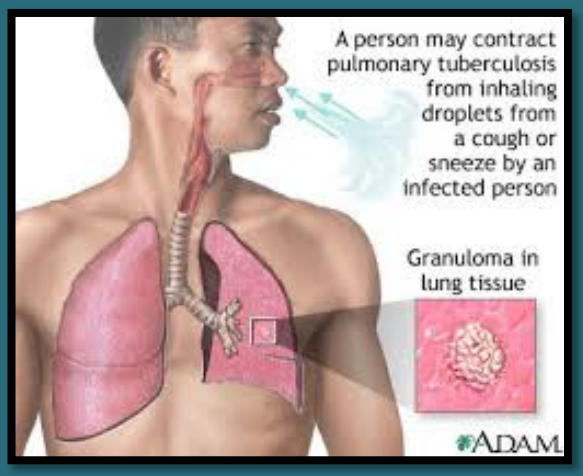
Tuberculosis (TB):

A disease of increased concern for those over the age of 65



What is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis is a disease caused by bacteria called Mycobacterium tuberculosis that usually attacks the lungs. However, TB can also attack the kidney, spine, and brain and is more likely to do so in those over the age of 65. If TB is not treated in a timely manner, it can cause death. Those over the age of 65 are at a high risk for TB due to underlying illnesses, increased likelihood of adverse drug reactions, and high rates of institutionalization that are associated with aging.

There are two types of Tuberculosis: Latent TB infection and TB disease.

Latent TB infection

For most people who breathe in TB bacteria, their immune system is able to fight off infection. In this case, the TB bacteria live inside the body, but do not cause any symptoms. People with latent TB infection cannot spread the disease to others. However, the TB bacteria can become active later on and multiply, which leads to TB disease. Nonetheless, many people who have latent TB infection never develop TB disease.

TB disease

If the immune system is unable to stop the TB bacteria from growing, the bacteria will become active and multiply inside the body, leading to TB disease. People with TB disease show symptoms and are infectious. Some people develop TB disease very soon after being infected, and others develop TB disease much later when their immune system becomes too weak to fight off the bacteria any longer.

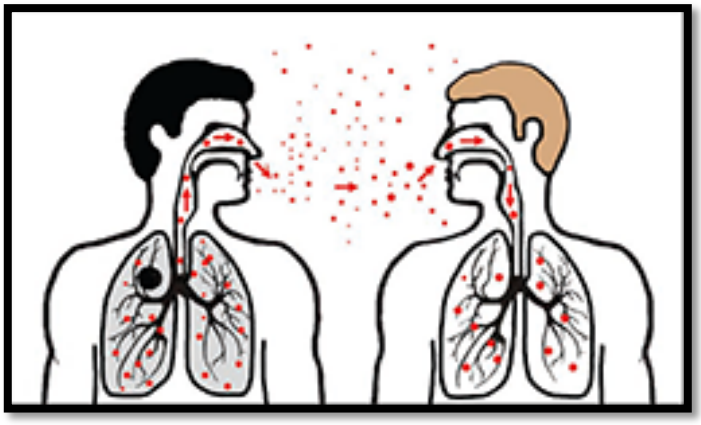
What are the symptoms of TB disease?

- Bad cough that lasts longer than three weeks
- Coughing up blood or sputum
- Chest pain
- Pain with breathing or coughing
- Weakness or fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Chills
- Fever
- Night sweats

Note: These symptoms are often confused with age-related illnesses in aging adults.

How can I catch TB?

TB is spread through the air from one person to another. When an infected person coughs, sneezes, speaks, or sings, bacteria are released and other people nearby can breathe in the bacteria and become sick.



How do I get tested for TB?

There are two kinds of tests that can be performed by your health care provider:

1. **TB skin test**

   A small amount of fluid (called tuberculin) is injected into the skin in the forearm. 48-72 hours later, a health care professional will check the skin for a positive reaction.

2. **TB blood test**

   Blood is drawn and tested in the laboratory to see how the immune system reacts to TB bacteria.

Both of these tests will only tell you if you have been infected with TB bacteria. They will not tell you if you have a latent TB infection or TB disease. Additionally, it is more difficult to diagnose TB in adults over the age of 65 due to common underlying health conditions associated with aging.

What do I do if I test positive?

A person with a positive TB test must get a chest X-ray or a sputum sample to determine if they have latent TB infection or TB disease. The sputum sample is the most accurate test among people over the age of 65.

How is TB treated?

Due to the increased difficulty in diagnosing TB in patients over the age of 65, it is very important to initiate treatment immediately upon diagnosis to ensure the best outcome. People with latent TB infection are treated with medications to prevent development of TB disease. If you test positive for latent TB infection, your health care provider will prescribe you 6-9 months of medicatins including: Isoniazid, Rifampin, and Rifapentine.

TB disease is treated with a course of antibiotics over a 6-9 month period. Medications prescribed for TB disease include Isoniazid, rifampin, pyrazinamide, and ethambutol.

It is very important to finish the entire course of medication in order to completely get rid of the infection. If medication is stopped too early, the infection can return. If medication is taken beyond the prescribed time frame, bacteria can become resistant to the medication. Since the likelihood of adverse drug reactions increases with age, it is very important to tell your health care provider if you are taking any other medications.