Patient Information:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

TUBERCULOSIS TESTING AND TREATMENT

What is Tuberculosis (TB)?

- Tuberculosis is a bacterial infection which usually affects the lungs and can lead to serious illness or death. Persons with active TB disease are contagious and can easily spread the infection to others through the air by coughing and sneezing.

What are the symptoms of TB?

- With early infection symptoms may be mild or absent, however as the infection progresses common symptoms include cough, fever, fatigue, weight loss, and night sweats. A person with active TB disease can spread the infection to others even if symptoms are mild.

What is the difference between TB infection and active TB disease?

- Most people infected by TB bacteria first develop *TB* infection.
- *TB Infection*: People with TB infection have been infected by TB bacteria, but their bodies fight the infection, inactivate the bacteria, and prevent them from growing. People with TB infection have no symptoms, do not feel sick, and cannot spread TB to others. Because the TB bacteria are inactivated but not killed, about ~, 10% of people with TB infection develop active TB disease at some point during their lives if they do not take preventive treatment. Skin testing is a way to identify people with TB infection.
- *Active TB Disease:* With active TB disease the bacteria grow and multiply leading to illness and symptoms of TB. Persons with active TB disease can spread the infection to others. Some people develop active TB disease soon after being infected by TB. Others may develop the disease later in life when their immune system can no longer prevent the TB bacteria from growing.

What is a Tuberculin skin test (PPD) and why do I need to be tested?

- The tuberculin skin test identifies people who have been infected with TB.
- The tuberculin skin test is positive in both people with TB infection and those with active TB disease.
- To perform the skin test, fluid is injected just under the skin on the lower arm.
- After 2 to 3 days some people will develop a bump at the injection site. The skin test is read as positive or negative based on the presence and size of the bump.
- A positive test usually indicates TB infection or active TB disease. A negative test usually indicates that the person has not been infected by TB.

Should everyone be tested for TB?

- No. Virginia Tech follows the United States Centers for Disease Control guidelines. The CDC recommends routine-testing only of individuals at increased risk of TB infection, active TB disease, or exposure to others with active TB disease.

I have had BCG vaccine. Do I still need to have a skin test?

- Yes. Although BCG vaccine may cause the tuberculin skin test to be positive, it

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does not do so consistently. The greater the time between receipt of BCG vaccine and having a positive skin test, the more likely the positive skin test is caused by infection with TB. The CDC states that skin test results in those who have received BCG vaccine must be read in the same way as those in non-vaccinated persons and that a positive test must be considered as evidence of infection with TB.

What does it mean if my tuberculin skin test is positive?

- A positive skin test usually indicates infection with TB. A chest x-ray and possible testing of material you cough up for the presence of TB bacteria must be done to determine if the positive test is due to TB infection or active TB disease.
- *TB infection:* A person with TB infection has a positive skin test, no symptoms of TB, and their chest x- ray is normal.
- *Active TB disease:* A person with active TB disease has a positive skin test and an abnormal chest x-ray showing lung infection. Rarely the chest x-ray is normal but the person has symptoms of TB. If this is the case further testing must be done to search for actively growing TB bacteria.

Should I take INH (Isoniazid)?

- About 10% of all people with a positive skin test will develop active TB at some point in their life, but the risk is considerable higher in the first few years following infection.
- INH (Isoniazid) is an antibiotic which has been shown to greatly reduce the risk of developing active TB disease in persons with a positive skin test. It must be taken as a single pill every day for 9 months to be effective. There is no cost for the treatment.
- The United States Centers for Disease Control recommends that all persons with TB infection take INH to prevent active TB disease.

Does INH have any side effects?

- INH is well tolerated and few people have side effects. Infrequently it can cause side effects such as liver inflammation, skin rash, or tingling of the hands and/or feet. While you are taking INH you will be seen at the Health Center every month by a nurse to be sure that you are having no problems taking INH.
- The risk of liver inflammation is lower than the risk of becoming seriously ill with active TB disease. Under age 20 there is almost no risk of liver inflammation; between 20 and 35 years of age the risk is 0.3% (3 persons out of 1000). For those over 35 years old, the risk is 1.2%.
- Early symptoms of liver inflammation may include fatigue, nausea, and loss of appetite. The nurse will ask about symptoms of liver inflammation every month when you come to the Health Center for your INH refill. If liver inflammation occurs the INH is stopped and the liver function usually returns to normal.

How long do I have to take INH?

- The CDC recommends that INH be taken daily for 9 months for the highest degree of protection.