

Facts About Tuberculosis that Homeless Shelter Workers and Volunteers Need to Know

Several cases of tuberculosis (TB) have been reported among homeless shelter residents in downtown Atlanta. 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. The Fulton County Department of Health and Wellness recommends that homeless shelter workers and volunteers who have duties involving prolonged face-to-face contact with homeless clients, especially those expected to work directly with clients for eight hours or more, present to the shelter a current (at minimum yearly) documentation of a TB test.

What is TB?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by germs that are spread from person to person through the air. TB usually affects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body.

How is TB spread?

TB germs are put into the air when a person with TB disease of the lungs or throat coughs, sneezes, speaks or sings. These germs can stay in the air for several hours, depending on the environment. Persons who breathe in the air containing these TB germs can become infected.

However, not everyone infected with TB bacteria becomes sick. People who are infected, but not sick, have what is called latent TB infection. People who have latent TB infection do not have any symptoms and cannot spread TB to others; they have a positive TB test and normal chest x-ray. Some people with latent TB infection go on to develop TB disease, but this is prevented if people with latent TB infection receive treatment for their infection.

What are the signs and symptoms of TB disease?

Persons working with the homeless population should be aware of the signs and symptoms of active TB disease which include the following:

- Coughing for more than two weeks
- Fever
- Night sweats
- Unexplained fatigue
- Unexplained weight loss

Individuals who have these symptoms should seek medical consultation and be cleared for TB before working or volunteering in homeless shelters. If volunteers identify a client who shows signs of active TB disease, they should inform shelter administrators right away so the client can be immediately given tissues or a surgical mask to cover his/her nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, and be referred for further medical evaluation as appropriate. 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 is being done to reduce the risk of TB transmission in homeless shelters?

The Fulton County Department of Health and Wellness is collaborating with organizations throughout Atlanta that provide services to the homeless, to institute administrative practices to control TB transmission in homeless housing facilities. These administrative controls include mandatory TB testing for homeless shelter staff and clients, TB symptom screening on intake for homeless persons requesting overnight stay in shelters, maintaining cough logs, providing surgical masks to clients with a bad cough, and for clients with suspected TB, immediately separating them from other clients and referring them to the Fulton County TB clinic or nearest hospital emergency department for medical evaluation.