

Tuberculosis screening during pregnancy

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a disease caused by bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. TB disease most commonly affects the lungs, but can also occur in other parts of the body. TB is spread and transmitted through the air we breathe. The disease can be cured with medication. In Finland, examinations and treatment are free of charge for the patient. TB is still a common disease in many countries. In Finland, more than 200 people get ill with TB disease every year. About half of them are immigrants. There are significantly more people, who are infected with TB bacteria. They have dormant bacteria in their bodies, i.e. latent tuberculosis infection. The risk of getting ill is at its peak in the years after infection, but the disease can also occur decades later.

Why are TB screening tests performed on pregnant women?

The risk of tuberculosis disease is increased during pregnancy and after giving birth. During pregnancy mother's tuberculosis can increase the risk preterm birth, low birth weight, and neonatal death. A child can get infected in utero or immediately after birth, and the disease is life-threatening for the newborn. A mother with TB disease can unwittingly expose other family members, as well as other mothers and newborns in the hospital, to the infection. The goal of screening is to find mothers who have TB disease and start curative medication for them early on. This protects the health of mothers, newborns and families.

Who should be screened, what tests should be done and when?

All expectant mothers who belong to risk groups are given a symptom questionnaire and a chest x-ray is arranged. The symptom questionnaire is done at the maternity clinic in the early stages of pregnancy and at the maternity hospital. A chest x-ray is performed about a month before delivery. A new chest x-ray is performed with each pregnancy.

Do I belong to a risk group?

You belong to the risk group if

- ❖ you were born or lived in a country where TB is very common
- ❖ you have arrived in Finland as a refugee or asylum seeker
- ❖ you have arrived in Finland from a refugee camp or a conflict area
- ❖ you have had tuberculosis in your immediate circle or you have been ill with TB yourself

What are the symptoms of tuberculosis?

The most typical symptoms of TB are a cough lasting more than three weeks and coughing up sputum (phlegm rising from the lungs). The sick person may have fever, lose weight, or sweat heavily at night. The overall condition and appetite may weaken. The symptoms of TB in the expectant mother may be mild and resemble the symptoms associated with a normal pregnancy. This is why it is important to tell your nurse and doctor about all your symptoms.

I don't have any symptoms, why is a chest x-ray necessary?

TB disease in the lungs can be detected by chest x-ray even if there are no symptoms. If the expecting mother's possible TB of the lungs is not detected, the newborn's infection may be overlooked and the child can become seriously ill. Therefore, a chest x-ray is taken even if the mother has no symptoms of TB but belongs to the risk group.

The chest X-ray does not harm the health of the foetus

The radiation exposure of the digital lung X-ray is minimal for the mother. It is the same level as what every person gets from the natural background radiation of the environment within about eight days. The radiation exposure of the foetus is considerably less, and the imaging does not cause harm to the foetus. If you wish, you can discuss this with a nurse at the counseling center.

Who is responsible for arranging the x-ray?

The maternity clinic will write a referral and provide you with more detailed instructions on the imaging. The chest x-ray must be done before entering the maternity hospital.