

## Tuberculosis (TB) screening during pregnancy

### Why is tuberculosis (TB) screening test performed on pregnant women?

During pregnancy, the mother's immune response is reduced so that the body does not reject the developing baby. In mothers infected with tuberculosis, the risk of developing active disease increases during pregnancy and after childbirth. TB increasingly weakens the mother's condition as the disease progresses. During pregnancy mother's TB 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 may unknowingly expose other family members and others in close contact, as well as in the maternity clinic (neuvola) and maternity hospital. For these reasons, early detection and prompt treatment of mother's TB are essential. Screening helps protect the health of mothers, newborns, and those close to them.

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

Examinations are performed on those who have been at risk of tuberculosis infection at any time in their lives. 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 (neuvola) in the early stages of pregnancy and at the maternity hospital. The chest X-ray is performed 4–6 weeks before delivery. The maternity clinic (neuvola) arranges the referral and provides guidance for the chest X-ray. The mother's immune response is reduced, and the risk of developing TB increases during each pregnancy. Therefore, a new chest X-ray is performed with each pregnancy.

### You belong to a tuberculosis (TB) risk group if:

- ❖ you were born in or lived in a country where TB is 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
- ❖ someone close to you has had TB, or you have been ill with TB yourself
- ❖ you have cared for TB patients in your work



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

Tuberculosis can be present in the lungs even if a person has no symptoms. The disease can be detected with a chest X-ray. If the expectant mother's TB of the lungs is not detected, the newborn's infection may not be suspected, and the child can become seriously ill. For this reason, a chest x-ray is taken even if the mother has no symptoms of TB but belongs to the risk group.

### A chest X-ray does not harm the fetus

The radiation exposure from a digital chest X-ray is very low for the mother. It is the same level as what all people, including children, get from the natural background radiation of the environment within about eight days. The fetus is not in the imaging area, and the X-ray does not harm the fetus.

### **What is tuberculosis (TB)?**

Tuberculosis is a disease caused by bacteria, most commonly affecting the lungs, but it can also occur in other parts of the body. When a person with TB speaks or coughs, bacteria are released into the air. TB is transmitted through the air we breathe, and a person may be exposed and become infected without knowing it.

TB is a common disease worldwide. Each year, more than 10 million people become ill with it, and 1.3 million people die from it. Approximately one quarter of the world's population has been infected with TB. In many cases, the bacteria remain inactive in the body (latent tuberculosis infection). Even if the infection was acquired in childhood, the bacteria can become active and cause disease at any time during a person's life. A weakened immune system increases the risk of developing the disease. Pregnancy is an example of such a condition. The risk is higher among young children and greatest among newborns.

In Finland, fewer than 200 people are diagnosed with TB each year, and more than half of those affected are immigrants. The disease can be cured with medication. In Finland, both examinations and treatment are free of charge.

### **What are the symptoms of tuberculosis (TB)?**

The most typical symptoms of tuberculosis are a persistent cough lasting more than three weeks and coughing up sputum (phlegm rising from the lungs). The sputum may contain blood. The sick person may also have fever, weight loss, or night sweats. Overall health and appetite may also decline.

In pregnant women, TB symptoms may be mild and can resemble normal pregnancy-related symptoms. Therefore, it is important to report all symptoms to a nurse or doctor.

More information about tuberculosis in different languages can be found on the website [tuberculosis.fi](http://tuberculosis.fi).