

Tuberculosis and Children in First Nations Communities

What is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a preventable and curable disease caused by a bacteria that usually affects the lungs. It spreads from person to person through the air.

Is there a TB vaccine?

A TB vaccine does not yet exist. There is a BCG vaccine that was used historically to prevent serious forms of TB disease in young children (e.g., TB in the brain or spread throughout the body).

The BCG vaccine program ended in 2003 because of the risk of harmful reactions for children with some medical conditions. The rates of new TB disease in First Nations communities has also decreased greatly since the 1990s, so there is little benefit to the BCG vaccination. FNHA TB Services monitors the rates of TB disease in young children very closely and prevention is a high priority. Since 2003, TB in First Nations children continues to be very rare.

A review of the small number of young children diagnosed with TB over the last 14 years found that the most important tool for preventing TB in children is timely screening and treatment of those who had contact with someone with TB disease. BCG vaccination would not have provided added protection against TB for these children.

TB screening for First Nations children and schools

Starting in November 2020, we no longer recommend routine TB screening of young children in First Nations communities and students attending First Nations managed schools (ie. band schools).

Why was there a change in TB screening recommendations?

In 2019, FNHA TB Services partnered with BCCDC to evaluate the outcomes and impacts of TB screening in First Nations children and schools. The evaluation looked at TB Skin Tests routinely given to First Nations children (e.g., aged 13 and younger) since the BCG vaccine was discontinued in 2003. It aimed to address many questions about screening recommendations that FNHA TB Services had heard from community members and health care providers in First Nations communities. The evaluation found that most children who were screened in the program had very low chances of getting TB, and routine screening of these children had very little impact on TB prevention.

What now?

We now need to shift our focus to ensure people who have higher chances of getting TB (e.g., people with chronic medical conditions, people who have had close contact with someone with TB disease) are getting the TB screening they need. With these new TB screening recommendations, First Nations children who have higher chances of getting TB will still get the screening they need.



First Nations Health Authority
Health through wellness

Evaluation is an important part of making sure programs are helping us to reach our goal of ending TB in First Nations communities. It gives us the information we need to keep improving our programs, and we will continue to monitor the outcomes of this change in TB screening recommendations.

More Information

FNHA Tuberculosis Services

<https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/communicable-disease-control/respiratory-infections-tuberculosis>