

Mayo Clinic - Causes of Tuberculosis

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Although tuberculosis is contagious, it's not especially easy to catch. You're much more likely to get tuberculosis from someone you live with or work with than from a stranger. Most people with active TB who've had appropriate drug treatment for at least two weeks are no longer contagious.

HIV and TB

Since the 1980s, the number of cases of tuberculosis has increased dramatically because of the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Tuberculosis and HIV have a deadly relationship – each drives the progress of the other.

Infection with HIV suppresses the immune system, making it difficult for the body to control TB bacteria. As a result, people with HIV are many times more likely to get TB and to progress from latent to active disease than are people who aren't HIV-positive.

Drug-resistant TB

Another reason tuberculosis remains a major killer is the increase in drug-resistant strains of the bacterium. Ever since the first antibiotics were used to fight tuberculosis 60 years ago, the germ has developed the ability to survive attack, and that ability gets passed on to its descendants. Drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis emerge when an antibiotic fails to kill all of the bacteria it targets. The surviving bacteria become resistant to that particular drug and frequently other antibiotics as well.