

Information on testing for tuberculosis within maternity care

Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease caused by the tuberculosis bacterium. Most often it causes a lung infection but other parts of the body may also be affected. Persons with pulmonary tuberculosis may be infectious since they cough up bacteria, which then spreads through the air. Only about 10% of all those infected by tuberculosis will actually become ill. Amongst the others, however, the infection will be dormant in the form of a so-called latent infection and in that case one remains healthy. The actual time of infection may lie far in the past. Today there are effective medicines to cure tuberculosis.

In large parts of the world tuberculosis is a common disease. In Sweden about 500 persons contract the illness each year and the great majority of these have come to Sweden from countries where tuberculosis is a common occurrence.

When a woman is infected by latent tuberculosis (LTB) and is pregnant there is an enhanced risk of her falling ill of tuberculosis during the first six months after childbirth. If the mother has pulmonary tuberculosis it could lead to a major risk of infection for the newborn child who is very sensitive to tuberculosis and runs the risk becoming seriously ill.

For this reason, it is recommended that expectant mothers, who have come to Sweden from countries where tuberculosis is common, undergo a TB test during pregnancy. The test consists of a simple blood test taken in connection with other routine sample collection during the patient's visit to the midwife. The test can show if the woman in question has been subject to previous infection by the tuberculosis bacteria. Should the test show evidence of TB infection the patient is then referred to a specialist at the infectious disease or pulmonary clinic.