

Tuberculosis (TB) Screening for Healthcare Students

University of Birmingham

A student guide to TB screening and FAQ

An accompanying document for the University of Birmingham Tuberculosis (TB) Screening and Health Clearance Policy for Healthcare, Social Care and Allied Health Students

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Policy owner: College of Medicine and Health (with Occupational Health and Professional Services)

1. Why you are being asked to complete TB screening

As a healthcare or social care student, you will work in clinical or community settings where you may have contact with patients, service users, or clinical environments.

Tuberculosis (TB) screening is part of occupational health clearance and aims to:

- Protect patients and service users
- Protect students and staff
- Identify active TB before clinical contact
- Ensure placements meet NHS occupational health requirements

The University of Birmingham uses an evidence-based, risk-proportionate approach to TB screening, consistent with NHS practice and national guidance.

2. What is TB?

TB is an infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*.

There are two important forms:

Active TB

- Causes symptoms (e.g. persistent cough, fever, night sweats, weight loss)
- Is infectious
- Requires treatment and temporary exclusion from clinical environments

Latent TB infection (LTBI)

- No symptoms
- Not infectious
- Indicates past immune exposure, not active disease

- Only a small proportion of people with latent TB ever develop active TB

For most healthy adults in the UK, including healthcare workers, the risk of developing active TB is very low.

3. TB risk in the UK and in healthcare students

The West Midlands has one of the higher TB rates in England, but it is important to understand *who* is most affected.

- TB in the UK is concentrated in specific populations
- Most cases occur in people:
 - Born in countries with high TB incidence, or
 - With prolonged close contact with someone who has active TB

Large national and international studies show that healthcare workers are not at higher risk of TB than the general population, once country of birth is taken into account.

For students on UK healthcare programmes:

- Most clinical placements are considered low TB-risk settings
- Risk is determined by exposure, not professional role

High risk settings are defined as those with prolonged contact with people with known TB (such as healthcare workers in TB clinics) or people who handle TB infected samples.

4. Why the University does not screen everyone with blood tests

You may notice that TB screening is handled differently to blood-borne virus (BBV) screening (e.g. hepatitis B, HIV).

This is because:

- Active TB is usually symptomatic
- TB blood tests (IGRA) and skin tests (Mantoux):
 - Do not diagnose active TB
 - Have false positive and false negative rates
- In low-risk populations, routine testing:
 - Identifies many false positives
 - Leads to unnecessary chest X-rays and referrals
 - Causes anxiety and delays to placements
 - Does not improve patient safety

For these reasons, the NHS and universities increasingly use risk-based TB screening, rather than testing everyone.

5. What TB screening involves at the University of Birmingham

Step 1: TB questionnaire (all students)

All students must complete a TB symptom and risk questionnaire, which asks about:

- TB symptoms
- Previous TB diagnosis
- Close contact with someone with TB
- Birth or prolonged residence in countries where TB is more common
- Previous BCG vaccination (or presence of a BCG scar)

Most students will complete this step only.

Step 2: When further testing is needed

You will only be asked to have further tests (e.g. blood test, skin test, chest X-ray) if one or more of the following apply:

- You report symptoms suggestive of TB
- You have had close contact with a confirmed or suspected TB case
- You were born in, or lived for more than 6 months in, a high TB-incidence country and have no evidence of prior BCG vaccination

If testing is required:

- Occupational Health will guide you through the process
- Testing is done to exclude active TB
- Most students tested are ultimately cleared without restriction

6. Will I need the BCG vaccine?

In most cases, no.

The UK no longer recommends routine BCG vaccination for healthcare students or healthcare workers unless they:

- Work regularly with patients known to have TB, or
- Handle TB samples in laboratory settings

Evidence shows that:

- BCG offers good protection against severe TB in young children
- Protection against adult pulmonary TB is limited and inconsistent
- BCG vaccination in low-risk adults does not reliably reduce TB infection

For these reasons, BCG is not routinely offered or required for students at the University of Birmingham.

7. Will this affect my placement?

- **Most students:** No impact at all
- **Students requiring further assessment:**
 - May have a short delay while tests are completed
 - Will be supported by Occupational Health
 - Will only be restricted from placement if active TB is suspected or confirmed

This approach is aligned with NHS Trust requirements and is designed to avoid unnecessary delays.

8. Is this approach fair?

Yes.

TB screening is based on public health risk, not nationality or background.

Targeted screening:

- Is used widely across the NHS and UK universities
- Reduces unnecessary testing in low-risk students
- Focuses resources where they are most clinically useful

The same criteria are applied consistently across all programmes, including:

- Medicine
- Dentistry
- Nursing
- Midwifery
- Pharmacy
- Physician Associate
- Physiotherapy

9. What are my responsibilities as a student?

You must:

- Complete TB screening questionnaires honestly and promptly
- Attend further assessment if advised

- Inform Occupational Health if:
 - You develop TB symptoms
 - You are exposed to someone with active TB during training

We hope that you will understand the importance of the screening process for your own protection and that of other members of the University and clinical communities.

Failure to engage with mandatory screening may delay or prevent access to placements, and/or may be considered a disciplinary offence, in line with University fitness to practise and placement requirements.

10. Where can I find more information?

If you would like to explore the evidence behind this approach, the following sources are recommended:

Key guidance and evidence

- NICE. *Tuberculosis: prevention, diagnosis, management and service organisation* (2016; updated 2024)
- UK Health Security Agency. *Tuberculosis in England: annual reports*
- UK Government. *Immunisation against infectious disease (The Green Book): Tuberculosis*
- Baussano et al. *Tuberculosis among healthcare workers*. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*
- Diel et al. *Interferon-gamma release assays for the diagnosis of latent TB*. *European Respiratory Journal*

11. Who can I contact?

- **Occupational Health:** oh@kaysmedical.com
- **Programme team:** cmh-admissions@contacts.bham.ac.uk

If you have concerns or questions, please contact Occupational Health — they are very used to discussing TB screening and happy to explain decisions in more detail.