

# TB screening for 3,000 people in Jalan Bukit Merah

Exercise will be held from Jan 11 to 15 after 10 new cases are linked to 2022 cluster

Joyce Teo  
Senior Health Correspondent

Ten new tuberculosis (TB) cases have been found to be part of a Jalan Bukit Merah cluster that first surfaced in 2022. This has prompted the Ministry of Health (MOH) to hold a mass screening exercise from Jan 11 to 15 to identify any undetected active cases and prevent further transmission.

The exercise is mandatory for some groups and voluntary for others, and an estimated 3,000 individuals are expected to be screened.

It will be mandatory for those who live and work in Blocks 1 and 3 Jalan Bukit Merah, employees at ABC Brickworks Market and Food Centre, as well as clients and staff of the senior activity centre at Block 3 Jalan Bukit Merah.

The 10 additional active TB cases are genetically linked to the previously announced cluster of seven cases at Block 2 Jalan Bukit Merah in 2022, said MOH. In total, the cluster now has 28 cases, including four at Blocks 1 and 3 that surfaced afterwards and seven that were picked up during the mass screening exercise that was held after the cluster of seven was identified.

The new screening effort is a risk mitigation exercise, in an ef-

fort to bring rates of TB down further in Singapore, said an MOH spokesman. The disease is endemic worldwide.

"Because we have detected these new cases, as a precaution we are conducting both mandatory and voluntary screening so we can reduce any further risk," he said.

While TB rates have been declining in Singapore over the years, there were still 1,251 new active TB cases among Singapore residents in 2022.

The prevention of transmission is challenging because an individual can develop active TB disease months or years after being exposed to it, but new genetic sequencing techniques in recent years have allowed MOH to more accurately link TB cases to one another, conduct screening and, hopefully, lower transmission numbers as much as possible, it said.

The 10 cases had surfaced between February 2022 and July 2023. Of the 10, two live in Block 1, one lives in Block 2, one works at the market and six reported frequent visits to the market and food centre but do not live in Jalan Bukit Merah.

MOH said these individuals started their treatment upon diagnosis and are no longer infectious, as active TB disease rapidly becomes non-infectious once

treatment starts.

It is also offering voluntary screening to a few groups of people. The first group comprises frequent visitors of ABC Brickworks Market and Food Centre or the three blocks in Jalan Bukit Merah. They had spent more than 12 hours a month there, any time between Nov 21 and Jan 24.

The rest are those who are living and working at Block 2 but did not undergo TB screening during the previous mass screening exercise in 2022, former residents and tenants of Blocks 1 and 3, and the pre-school teachers and pupils at Block 3.

MOH said that screening is not necessary for those who had only

## REDUCING FURTHER RISK

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MINISTRY OF HEALTH SPOKESMAN

occasionally visited the blocks, market and food centre or the area because the risk of transmission to people who are not close contacts of a TB case is low.

TB is a curable airborne disease. Most people have lung TB, which spreads when a person coughs or sneezes. Those at risk of being infected are people with close, prolonged day-to-day contact of days to weeks, rather than minutes to hours, with the person, MOH said. One cannot get TB from sharing cups, utensils or food. TB is also not spread through shaking hands, kissing, touching bed linen or toilet seats.

In addition to the active cases that were picked up, MOH has also detected almost 200 cases of latent TB infection after screening almost 800 individuals in Jalan Bukit Merah in 2022.

About 10 per cent of those with latent TB infection will develop active TB disease over their lifetime, but the risk is highest in the first two years after being infected.

Those with active TB disease often exhibit symptoms like a cough that lasts for more than three weeks, persistent fever, night sweats, weight loss, fatigue and, rarely, blood in their sputum. Treatment involves taking a combination of drugs for at least six to nine months. Within two weeks of treatment, they will become non-infectious.

Those with latent TB infection do not have symptoms and cannot spread the disease to others, but the TB bacteria in their body can become active months to years later. They will be offered preventive treatment to reduce the risk of developing active TB in the future. Treatment involves taking one type of medication for four to six months.

From Jan 6 to 9, staff from MOH and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, with support from the People's Association, will be visiting all units at the affected blocks and stalls at the ABC Brickworks Market and Food Centre to engage residents and stallholders and answer any questions that they may have.

joyceteo@sph.com.sg

## Should I be worried about TB?

The Straits Times answers some questions about tuberculosis (TB) and a screening exercise to be conducted by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in Jalan Bukit Merah from Jan 11 to 15.

**Q Does this exercise mean TB has resurfaced in Singapore?**

**A** TB is endemic in Singapore. While active TB cases have been going down, there are new cases every year. There were around 1,200 new active TB cases in Singapore in 2022.

Latent TB infection is not uncommon here. Its prevalence increases with age, ranging from 2 per cent among those aged between 18 and 29 years old, to 29 per cent among those aged between 70 and 79 years old.

**Q What is the difference between latent TB infection and active TB disease?**

**A** A person with active TB disease is likely infectious and may have symptoms such as a prolonged cough, persistent fever, night sweats, weight loss, fatigue, chest pain and, on rare occasions, blood in the sputum.

Such patients need to be treated promptly. If not, they can become sicker and more infectious, an MOH spokesman said. The disease can also become more difficult to treat if a person waits too long and the TB bacteria start to invade more parts of the body.

A person with latent TB infection does not have symptoms and cannot spread it to others, as the TB bacteria remain inactive in the body. But the disease can be activated months or even years later due to a weakened immune system, certain medical conditions or other factors.

**Q How will the screening be done?**

**A** From Jan 11 to 13, staff from MOH and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) will be going door to door to conduct mandatory screening in the homes of residents of blocks 1 and 3 Jalan Bukit Merah.

Stations for mandatory screening will be set up at the open-air carpark next to Block 2 from Jan 11 to 15, to cater to those working at the blocks or the ABC Brickworks Market and Food Centre.

The screening for those who are offered voluntary screening will also be done at the stations at the carpark, on Jan 14 and 15, but MOH said it is strictly by appointment only. To make an appointment, go to <https://go.gov.sg/tbs>

**Q What is the screening process for TB in Jalan Bukit Merah?**

**A** The screening will be done in two stages. The first, from Jan 11 to 15, involves administering a blood test to check for TB exposure or latent TB infection.

In the second stage, from Jan 18 to 29, those who tested positive on the blood test will have to undergo additional evaluation, including a chest X-ray and clinic review. This is done to see if they have active TB disease.

**Q Do I have to pay?**

**A** No, both mandatory and voluntary screenings are free of charge, with priority given to those for whom screening is mandatory, MOH said.

**Q How is TB treated?**

**A** Those with latent TB infection have to take a drug for four to six months.

Those with active TB disease have to take a combination of drugs for six to nine months. They become non-infectious and their symptoms will resolve very quickly.

But if they do not finish their six- to nine-month course, the rate of relapse is very high. More than getting TB again, they may get resistant forms of TB, said MOH.

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To ensure that they take the drugs across the entire period, they will have to make a trip to the polyclinic to take their medication, under the observation of a health-care worker.

Typically, in the first two months, they need to take their medications daily. In most cases, after the first two months, they can take it three times a week, but they will still have to do that at the polyclinic, said an NCID spokesperson.

**Q If I have latent TB infection, what are the chances of it developing into active TB disease?**

**A** About 10 per cent of those with latent TB infection will develop active TB disease over their entire lifetime, but the risk is highest in the first two years after being infected, said the NCID spokesperson.

Half of this group will develop it in the first two years after exposure, while the rest will develop it later during their lifetime.

The treatment for those with latent TB infection is about 60 per cent to 90 per cent effective in preventing a person from having active TB disease.

**Q I have recovered after being treated for active TB disease. Can I get it again?**

**A** The likelihood of being infected again is there, but it is extremely low.

More than 95 per cent of those who complete their treatment for active TB disease are successfully treated. There is a 5 per cent chance of relapse, but this can occur many years down the road, NCID said.

There is a TB vaccine given at birth, known as Bacillus Calmette-Guérin or BCG, which is effective in preventing serious forms of TB, such as TB targeting the linings of the brain in young children, but it does not protect against lung TB in adults.

**Q Can I get TB from shaking hands with a person who has TB disease?**

**A** No. TB is not spread through shaking hands, kissing, or touching bed linen or toilet seats.

**Q Does mask-wearing help protect me from getting TB?**

**A** In general, individuals who are inclined to wear masks for protection against Covid-19 or other respiratory diseases can do so.

There is no specific recommendation for the Jalan Bukit Merah area because the risk there at this point is no different from anywhere else, said MOH.

The key objective is for people to come forward to be screened. So far, most of the people identified through TB screening had latent TB infections.

Although they were not infectious, they were given treatment to prevent them from getting TB down the road.

**Q What precautions can I take if I am showing symptoms?**

**A** Individuals with TB symptoms should wear a mask and avoid going to crowded places.

When an individual is diagnosed with active TB, he will be started on treatment immediately and placed on medical leave.

Once treatment starts, he will quickly become non-infectious. There is no need to close workplaces or places where a recently diagnosed active TB case has visited.

Joyce Teo



Workers at ABC Brickworks Market and Food Centre will be among those who will have to undergo the TB screening exercise after the emergence of 10 new cases in the area. Of the 10, one works at the market and six reported frequent visits to the market and food centre. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

## Worker dies after falling 7.5m at Jurong Region Line work site

Kok Yufeng  
Transport Correspondent

A construction worker died in the early hours of Jan 4 after he fell about 7.5m while at a work site for the upcoming Jurong Region Line (JRL), the first reported fatal workplace accident of 2024.

The 27-year-old from Myanmar fell over the edge of an unfinished platform that he was installing at about 2.30am.

The Ministry of Manpower

(MOM) said the accident took place near Jurong West Street 75, where the future and tentatively named Gek Poh JRL MRT station will be located.

The Singapore Civil Defence Force received a call for assistance at Block 749 Jurong West Street 73, which is next to Jurong West Street 75.

The worker, who was employed by Jiangxi Construction Development, was taken to Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, where he later died from his injuries.

MOM is investigating the inci-

dent, and the Land Transport Authority (LTA), the project's developer, is assisting with the probe.

"We share our deepest condolences with the family of the deceased worker and are working with our contractors to provide them with support and assistance," said an LTA spokeswoman, adding that it takes a serious view of such safety incidents.

CES\_SDC, a subsidiary of construction and real estate conglomerate Chip Eng Seng Corp, is the occupier of the Jurong West Street 75 work site and the project's main

contractor.

It was awarded a \$226.6 million contract in 2020 by LTA to design and construct the JRL stations in Gek Poh and Tawas, as well as two viaducts, one running along Jurong West Street 75 and the other running between the two stations.

Following the fatal accident on Jan 4, work at the Jurong West Street 75 construction site was stopped.

At the same time, a safety timeout was imposed on all LTA work sites, which means construction work must be suspended temporarily so

that safety procedures can be reviewed, and a list of activities like conducting meetings with workers to recap site safety is completed. The safety timeout is still ongoing.

MOM said that as a general safety measure, workers should be equipped with safety harnesses and secured to anchor points at all times when there is a risk of falling from a height.

The accident on Jan 4 is the second time a worker has died at an LTA work site in the past two months, and the second worker death linked to the construction of

the JRL.

Work on the first phase of Singapore's seventh MRT line, which includes the stations in Gek Poh and Tawas, is expected to be completed in 2027, a year later than originally scheduled due to delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

When fully opened in 2029, the 24km-long above-ground rail line will have 24 stations – extending the reach of the MRT network to the Jurong area.

Daily ridership is expected to grow from 200,000 in the initial years to more than 500,000, along with the development of the Jurong Innovation District, Tengah town and Jurong Lake District.

yufeng@sph.com.sg