

# Easy steps can prevent spread of tuberculosis in homes, villages

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Considering the devastation to a whole generation of Alaska Natives caused by tuberculosis, the alarm caused by recent reports of TB outbreaks in villages is understandable.

But medical experts say that despite the existence of substandard health conditions in many rural communities, there is less to fear from this disease than 40 years ago.

"TB is a curable disease. It's not necessary for people to suffer from this anymore," said Dr. Mike Beller of the state Division of Public Health.

Beller said it's important to understand that a person can be infected without actually becoming ill. He estimates that nearly 100 percent of Alaska Natives were infected before or during the 1950s, while only about 10 percent

actually developed TB. Beller said recent cases were mainly elders previously infected who were more likely to develop an active case as their age advanced.

The good news, according to Beller, is that easy, positive steps can be taken to prevent the spread of TB—and they don't involve separating family members living in the same home. The steps are:

1. If a person has one or more symptom of TB—persistent cough for 2-3 weeks, fever, weight loss, night sweats—see a medical provider as soon as possible.

2. If a person has been advised to take TB medication, either as prevention or a cure, take the pills exactly as prescribed for as long as directed; never miss a dose. To be effective, TB medications often must be taken for up to six months. Sometimes, medication brings such quick relief from the symptoms that people stop taking them before the infection is com-

pletely under control.

3. Have children tested for TB infection in school.

With better medication, diagnosis and intervention by public health officials, as well as greater public awareness, experts say there is no reason for TB to become the fearful condition it used to be. However, they say that people need to strictly follow the steps described above. In particular, people should not avoid seeing their regular medical provider for fear they might be infected with TB.