# Advancing Tuberculosis Diagnostics: Transformative Approaches for Early Detection and Drug Resistance Screening

Michael Davison*

*Department of Infectious Diseases, NYU Langone Hospital, Mineola, United States of America*

## DESCRIPTION

Tuberculosis (TB) remains a significant public health challenge worldwide. Caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, this disease primarily affects the lungs but can spread to other parts of the body, such as the lymph nodes, bones and brain. Despite advancements in healthcare, TB continues to be one of the leading infectious causes of death globally, with millions of new cases reported annually. Addressing TB requires an understanding of its transmission dynamics, clinical manifestations and effective diagnostic methods.

### Epidemiology and transmission

TB spreads through airborne particles released when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or speaks. Inhalation of these droplets can result in infection, although not all exposed individuals develop active disease. The progression from latent TB infection to active disease depends on factors such as immune status, age and concurrent health conditions. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), TB disproportionately affects low- and middle-income countries, where healthcare access is limited.

### Clinical manifestations

TB presents in two forms: Latent and active. Latent TB occurs when the bacteria remain dormant in the body without causing symptoms. Individuals with latent infection are not contagious but carry a lifetime risk of disease reactivation. Active TB, on the other hand, causes noticeable symptoms such as persistent cough lasting more than three weeks, chest pain, weight loss, fever, night sweats and fatigue. If untreated, active TB can cause severe complications, including respiratory failure and death.

Extrapulmonary TB affects organs other than the lungs, leading to varied symptoms depending on the site of infection. For instance, TB of the spine can result in back pain, while TB meningitis causes severe headaches and neurological symptoms.

Diagnosing TB in these forms can be more challenging due to the non-specific nature of the symptoms.

### Diagnostic approaches

Accurate and timely diagnosis of TB is essential for effective management and prevention of disease transmission. Diagnostic methods for TB have evolved over the years, incorporating both traditional and newer technologies.

**Microscopy:** Microscopic examination of sputum samples stained with Ziehl-Neelsen or fluorescent stains has been the primary method for TB detection in many settings. While this technique is simple and low-cost, its sensitivity is limited, particularly in individuals with low bacterial loads or extrapulmonary disease.

**Culture:** Culturing *M. tuberculosis* from clinical specimens remains the most reliable method for confirming TB. It allows for drug susceptibility testing, which guides treatment decisions. However, culture techniques require specialized laboratory facilities and can take several weeks due to the slow-growing nature of the bacteria.

**Tuberculin Skin Test (TST):** The TST, also known as the Mantoux test, assesses immune response to injected Purified Protein Derivative (PPD) from *M. tuberculosis*. While useful for identifying latent infection, the TST lacks specificity, as individuals vaccinated with Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) or exposed to non-tuberculous mycobacteria may yield false-positive results.

**Interferon-Gamma Release Assays (IGRAs):** IGRAs, such as the QuantiFERON-TB Gold test, measure the release of interferon-gamma in response to *M. tuberculosis*-specific antigens. These blood-based tests are more specific than the TST and unaffected by prior BCG vaccination. They are particularly useful in diagnosing latent TB in low-prevalence settings.

**Molecular techniques:** Advances in molecular diagnostics have significantly enhanced TB detection. The GeneXpert MTB/RIF

assay, for example, uses Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) to detect *M. tuberculosis* DNA and identify rifampin resistance within hours. This test has greatly improved the ability to diagnose TB in resource-limited settings and offers rapid insights into drug resistance patterns.

**Imaging:** Chest radiography remains a valuable tool for diagnosing pulmonary TB. It can reveal characteristic abnormalities such as cavitations or infiltrates. In cases of extrapulmonary TB, Computed Tomography (CT) or Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) may be required to assess the disease extent.

### Challenges in diagnosis

Diagnosing TB presents several challenges, particularly in resource-limited settings. Many traditional diagnostic methods are labor-intensive, time-consuming, or require laboratory infrastructure that is unavailable in remote areas. Additionally, extrapulmonary TB and cases with HIV co-infection often have atypical presentations, making clinical diagnosis more complex.

Efforts to improve TB diagnostics include integrating molecular methods into primary healthcare systems and developing point-of-care tests. These innovations aim to shorten diagnostic timelines, improve detection rates and reduce the burden on laboratories.

## CONCLUSION

Tuberculosis continues to pose a significant global health burden. Early and accurate diagnosis is key to controlling the disease, reducing transmission and improving patient outcomes. While traditional methods like microscopy and culture remain important, molecular diagnostics and advanced imaging techniques are reshaping the diagnostic landscape. Addressing challenges in diagnostic access, particularly in low-resource settings, is essential for global TB control efforts. Investing in diagnostic capacity, along with public health interventions, holds the potential to turn the tide against TB.