Information on Two-Step TB Skin Test

The two-step test TB skin test is NOT the usual test in which you receive an injection of PPD and the test area is observed once 48-72 hours later.

The two-step PPD test is used to detect people with past TB infection who now have diminished skin test reactivity.

Some people who were infected with TB in the past lose the ability to react to the tuberculin solution. When these people are tested many years after the initial infection, they may have a negative reaction. However, if they are tested a second time within up to one year of the first test, they may have a positive reaction. This positive reaction is due to a "boosted" ability to react to the tuberculin solution. To avoid misinterpretation between a boosted response and a new infection, many facilities employ the 2-step testing procedure.

In this procedure a person is given a baseline PPD test. If the test is negative, a second test is administered one to three weeks later. If the second test is negative, the person is considered uninfected. If the second test is positive, then the person is considered to have a “boosted" reaction to an infection that occurred a long time ago.

Secondary testing is also useful to help offset potential false negative testing results.

Typically four visits are required to complete two-step TB testing.

Visit 1, Day 1
The PPD antigen is applied under the skin.

Visit 2, Day 2 or 3
The PPD test is read. If the first test is positive, it indicates that the person is infected with TB. A chest X-ray and evaluation is necessary. If the person is asymptomatic and the chest X-ray indicates no active disease, the person may be cleared for work.

Visit 3, Day 7
A second PPD skin test is applied to those people in whom the PPD skin test is negative.
Visit 4, Day 9 or 10
The second test is read. A positive 2nd test indicates TB infection in the distant past. The person is referred for a chest X-ray examination. An asymptomatic person whose chest X-ray indicates no active disease may be cleared to work.

For people who were vaccinated against TB with BCG vaccine, tuberculosis blood testing (eg. Quantiferon) is the preferred method for TB screening. Two-step testing is not needed with tuberculosis blood testing. People who have received BCG vaccination still can be tested with PPD, but false positive PPD rates may be higher. That being said, positive PPD tests usually indicate TB infection. Thus, a chest X-ray is necessary for all people with a positive PPD.