

Tuberculosis: Is it easy to contract?

For Immediate Release

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(Galesburg, IL | May 23, 2018) – It's a Friday afternoon and you have just received word that there is a confirmed case of Tuberculosis (TB) in the high school and your child needs to be tested. What do you do?

First of all, don't panic. TB is a very slow growing germ that is relatively hard to transfer. Simply passing by an infected person is unlikely to do it. Although TB is contagious, it's not easy to contract.

TB is spread through the air by coughing, laughing, and sneezing. To contract the disease you need to be in close contact for several hours a day with someone who has TB. It cannot be spread by contact with someone's clothing, drinking glass, eating utensils, handshake, toilet or other surfaces.

TB is detected through a Mantoux tuberculin skin test (TST) which is performed by injecting a small amount of fluid called tuberculin into the skin in the lower part of the arm. The test is read within 48 to 72 hours by a trained health care worker, who looks for a reaction on the arm.

"One of the biggest misconceptions about TB is that people think that school aged children are immunized for TB before they enter school," said Terri McCrery, Infection Preventionist at OSF HealthCare St. Mary Medical Center in Galesburg. "In the United States, we test to determine if you have been exposed to the disease, as there is not a reliable vaccine available."

Symptoms of TB can include a cough of longer than three weeks, unexplained weight loss, night sweats, chills, fever and coughing up blood.

Not everyone infected with TB bacteria becomes sick. As a result, two TB-related conditions exist: latent TB infection and active TB disease.

"Once people have TB, they always have it," said McCrery. "People can have latent TB and not have any symptoms. Latent TB is not infectious. It is only contagious for people with active symptoms."

Active TB is typically treated for six to nine months with antibiotics. A person with TB will become non-contagious within a few days to weeks of effective treatment and will be able to return to normal activities without risk to others while completing treatment. If not treated properly, TB disease can be fatal.