

Posted August 11, 2009

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Outbreak in Escambia County - Individuals in close contact with infants should be vaccinated -

With both statewide and local outbreaks of pertussis infection (whooping cough), local health officials promote the importance of pertussis vaccination for protecting the most vulnerable in our population. It is especially important for the family of newborns and infants to talk with their own doctor about pertussis vaccination. This disease can be most serious for infants, people who are immune-compromised, and the elderly, and is often spread to them from adolescent or adult family members.

Local outbreaks of pertussis

The State of Florida is currently experiencing more pertussis (whooping cough) than usual. In Escambia County from January 1, 2009 through August 12, 2009, the Escambia County Health Department has received over 50 reports of cases of pertussis. This is much higher than the usual 3-5 cases reported per year.

What is pertussis?

Pertussis or “whooping cough”, as it has historically been known, is a very contagious (can be spread from person to person) bacterial infection. It is spread through coughing and can be very serious for infants, immune compromised individuals and the elderly. Pertussis is especially hard on infants because, in many cases, the infant has not yet received the first vaccination for pertussis. Ninety two (92%) percent of hospitalizations for pertussis occur in children under 6 months of age.

Symptoms

The main symptom of pertussis is “cough” that lasts for 2 weeks or more and can last for several months. The incubation period (time of exposure to first symptoms) is usually 7-10 days but can be up to 21 days. The period when pertussis is most contagious is within the first 2 weeks of the cough. The cough is sometimes very bad and can lead to vomiting, apnea (inability to catch one’s breath and turning blue), sleep loss, weight loss, nose bleeds, rib fractures, hernia and even pneumonia. In infants, the cough may have a “whoop” sound at the end. This “whoop” sound happens because the baby is trying to breathe in with difficulty. Without proper treatment, the infant could continue to have these “coughing fits” and could possibly die due to lack of oxygen.

Children, adolescents and adults can become infected with pertussis, and it is thought that, in many outbreaks, adults are more likely to be the first case that spreads the bacteria to others; especially infants. Because the cough in adults usually does not come with the “whoop” sound, and may even be mild, it may go unnoticed and undiagnosed. The individual may cough for several weeks before the characteristic “coughing fits” start, but by this time, many others may have been infected. Even though adolescents and adults may have been vaccinated against pertussis as a child, this protection has greatly lessened by the time they reach the teenage years and adulthood.

If you have symptoms

What can you do if you have symptoms of pertussis?

1. See a doctor! There are specific antibiotics that treat pertussis, so it is important to see a doctor if you have a cough that has lasted more than 2 weeks and may include the symptoms described above. Also see a doctor if you have a cough and have been exposed to someone who has been diagnosed with pertussis.
2. Be sure to describe your cough to the physician and inform him/her of any close contact you have had with other individuals who have had a similar cough or who have been diagnosed with pertussis.
3. Stay home while on the antibiotic prescribed by your physician for 5 days to prevent further spread. Cover your cough and wash your hands frequently.
4. Call the Health Department (Epidemiology Program-850-595-6683) to notify us of the diagnosis. Pertussis is a reportable disease and must be reported to the State and CDC.

What about vaccinations?

Get vaccinated! The Escambia County Health Department provides the vaccinations below:

- **DTaP** (diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis) is approved for children 6 weeks through 7 years. A series of 5 shots are given with additional booster shots: 6-8 weeks, 4 months, 6 months, 15-18 months and a booster shot at age 4-6 years prior to kindergarten.
- **TDaP** (tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis) shot is approved for adolescents and adults aged 11-64 years. If it has been 2 or more years since you or your teen received a tetanus shot, it may be appropriate for you to receive the Tdap shot. Check with your healthcare provider or the Escambia County Health Department to see if Tdap vaccine is advised.

It is especially important for women thinking about becoming pregnant, new mothers soon after giving birth, teenage brothers and sisters, and the baby's grandparents to get a booster vaccination (TDaP). This will help to avoid exposing the newborn baby to this infection that could make them very sick.

Increased vaccination coverage in adolescents and adults may lead to fewer infants contracting pertussis. This will lead to fewer hospitalizations and deaths in young infants.

Do the right thing—get vaccinated!