

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) is Back in Our Schools Again

Pertussis (whooping cough) is beginning to raise its ugly head again in our community! Boulder County Public Health issued a notice on November 16, 2007, alerting parents and schools of a confirmed case of pertussis at Horizon K-8 School. Since then, one additional case has been reported at Fairview High School, making it a total of 23 cases in Boulder County already this year.

Pertussis occurs in cycles, with many cases occurring for several years followed by fewer cases occurring for several years. Currently, we are at the beginning of the up-cycle. We expect to see many people become ill with pertussis this winter and over the next few years.

Now is the time to protect your family and yourself! The DTaP vaccine, which is given to infants, and the Tdap vaccine, which is for people 10 through 64 years of age, protect against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. Call your physician to make sure your young child has received the correct doses of DTaP vaccine, and make sure you and your other family members have received the Tdap vaccine.

Because of the seriousness and infectiousness of pertussis, the Colorado Board of Health made the Tdap immunization a school requirement for sixth and tenth grade students. However, ANY child 10 years and older who had the Td vaccine two or more years ago should also get the Tdap vaccine.

Pertussis is difficult to diagnose until the disease is fully established. By the time that happens, the person does not receive much relief from treatment and has likely spread it to others.

Symptoms include:

- Cold-like symptoms in the first week of illness (e.g. runny nose, sore throat).
- Severe coughing starting the second week of illness and continuing for up to three months.
- Gagging or vomiting after coughing and difficulty breathing during coughing episodes.
- Coughing at night that interferes with sleep.

The following questions and answers provide more information:

Q. What is pertussis?

A. Pertussis is a severe, contagious respiratory disease. People with pertussis have coughing fits that often include gagging, vomiting, and sometimes difficulty breathing. Pertussis can be life-threatening in infants, who are often infected by their parents or siblings.

Q. Is there pertussis in Boulder County?

A. Yes. In 2004 and 2005, Boulder County had the highest average rate of pertussis cases of any urban county in the state. For more information about pertussis, visit the following website: www.keppertussisout.org

Q. Who gets pertussis?

A. Although the most serious disease occurs in infants, middle and high school students are the groups who most often get sick; adults also make up a significant number of cases.

Q. Is pertussis a serious disease for older children and adults?

A. Yes. Older children and adults can become extremely ill from pertussis. They can have coughing fits that result in difficulty catching their breath, vomiting after coughing fits, broken ribs, and pneumonia. They can become too sick to attend school or work for weeks or months. Older children and adults can infect others before they even know they are sick themselves.

Q. Is there a vaccine that protects infants from pertussis?

A. Yes. The DTaP vaccine protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. It is given as a series of five shots to children two months through four or five years of age.

Q. Why can children who received all of the DTaP doses still get pertussis?

A. Immunity to all three diseases begins to wane approximately 5 years after receiving the vaccine, and is almost completely gone after 10 years. This is true for people of any age, whether immunity was developed as a result of a vaccine or as a result of having the diseases. Another reason is that the vaccine is not 100% effective. However, those who have some immunity from the vaccine usually have a milder case of the disease.

Q. What is the new Tdap vaccine?

A. The Tdap vaccine provides protection against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis for people 10 through 64 years of age.

Q. When should people get the Tdap vaccine?

A. The Tdap vaccine should be given five years after receiving the last Td shot; however, **in communities where pertussis frequently occurs, like Boulder County**, or for people who will be in contact with infants younger than 12 months of age, Tdap can be given two years or sooner after the last Td immunization.