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Pertussis-What you Need to Know

The Owensboro Catholic School System along with the Green River District Health Department is dedicated to the well being of our children. This article is to inform you that we have had one confirmed case of Pertussis in the Owensboro Catholic School System.

Pertussis, commonly called whooping cough, is a highly contagious infectious bacterial disease of the upper respiratory tract. Pertussis is spread by respiratory droplets, such as coughing, sneezing, or talking. Pertussis begins with cold-like symptoms, including a cough, which becomes much worse over a period of 1-2 weeks. People with pertussis may have a series of coughing spells, sometimes followed by vomiting, turning blue in the face, or difficulty catching their breath. The cough is often worse at night and cough medicines usually do not help control it. Symptoms can last for up to 6 weeks or longer if untreated. You must be within 3 feet of someone for an hour of more face to face contact in order to be considered exposed. Casual contact does not spread this disease.

This disease is usually milder in older children and adults, but for younger children, particularly those that have not been or are too young to be immunized, this can be an especially dangerous disease. Infants often require hospitalization and complications can occur, including pneumonia, brain damage, seizures, and even death.

While Pertussis can be a very dangerous disease, we must remember that it can be prevented. Thankfully, we live in a society where vaccines are widely available and can be used in the prevention of serious diseases, such as Pertussis. The vaccine to prevent Pertussis in young children has been used since the 1940s. The vaccine, called DTap, is recommended that children receive a primary 3-dose series at 2, 4, and 6 months of age and two booster immunizations at 15-18 months and 4-6 years of age.

Despite high vaccination coverage rates (over 80% of children 19-35 months of age have received four doses), the incidence rate of pertussis has gradually increased since the 1980s. Surveillance indicates that the greatest increase in rates of pertussis have occurred for adolescents and adults, possibly due to waning vaccine immunity and differences in reporting. We have seen Pertussis cases in our district already this year and saw a large increase in cases in 2008.

So, it is very important to remember that you can contract this disease even if you have been previously immunized and pass it on to others, especially infants, where it can have a devastating effect on their health. This is why the vaccination is so important to consider. The DTap is only licensed for children up to 7 years of age, however, there is another vaccine called the Tdap that is available for individuals 11 to 64 years of age. Please check with your doctor to see if they carry the Tdap vaccine.

Don't delay, call and get your Tdap today! Protect yourself and those that you love.

Please note that this information is not meant to alarm you, but rather for you to be educated on and be watchful of any symptoms associated with this disease.

We recommend that if you or your child has any signs or symptoms, such as a persistent cough illness greater than a few weeks, cough associated with vomiting, or coughing spells where they cannot get their breath, please contact your primary care physician to be tested. A nasal swab or culture is the only way to tell if someone has this disease.

For any other questions, call Janie Cambron, Regional Epidemiologist, ext. 3067