

PERTUSSIS: THE 100 DAY COUGH

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a very contagious disease that is vaccine preventable. Pertussis is currently circulating in Marin County schools and communities, with several recent cases reported to the health department.

Pertussis starts like the common cold with a runny nose or congestion, sneezing, and a mild cough, usually with a low or no fever. After one to two weeks, coughing becomes more severe. Children with the disease cough violently and rapidly, over and over, until the air is gone from their lungs and they are forced to inhale with a loud “whoop.” This characteristic whoop may not be present in everyone with the disease, especially young infants and adults. Both adults and children may have vomiting after fits of coughing.

People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. Exposed persons can become ill as long as 21 days after being around someone with pertussis. Infants under one year of age and immunocompromised individuals are especially susceptible to pertussis. More than half of infected infants must be hospitalized. About 1 child in 10 will get pneumonia; 1 in 50 will have seizures; 1 in 250 will develop a brain disorder called encephalopathy. In rare cases pertussis can be deadly. Pertussis causes about 10 to 20 deaths each year in the United States, usually in infants or unvaccinated children.

What should you do? The best way to prevent pertussis is to get vaccinated. Make sure your children receive all 5 of the recommended DTaP doses, which should be given at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15 to 18 months, and 4 to 6 years. This vaccine protects against diphtheria and tetanus in addition to pertussis. Since protection from pertussis can fade with time, children should have a booster dose of Tdap at 10 or 11 years of age and booster doses every 10 years. Adults should get booster doses every 10 years as well. If you have an infant, everyone who comes in contact with that infant should have a Tdap vaccine – mother, father, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunt and uncles, and caregivers.

If you develop a cold with a severe or prolonged cough, you may have pertussis. The best way to know is to contact your doctor. Medication is available for both people who have pertussis and people who are at risk of getting pertussis because they were with someone who was infected. As with any illness, cover your cough and stay home when you are sick.

This information is provided by the Marin County Immunization Coalition.

Reference: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Pertussis/>