

Cherry Hill Public Schools

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February 3, 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian:

We have had two cases of confirmed pertussis (whooping cough) identified in our district at Kilmer and Stockton schools. All students who were diagnosed with and treated for pertussis were fully immunized against this disease.

Pertussis is a highly contagious disease that is spread through the air by a cough or a sneeze. Pertussis begins with cold symptoms and a cough, which become much worse over 1-2 weeks. Symptoms usually include a long series of coughing fits followed by a whooping noise. However, older children, adults and very young infants may not develop the whoop. There is generally only a slight fever. People with pertussis may have a series of severe coughing fits followed immediately by vomiting, turning blue, or difficulty catching breath. The cough is often worse at night, and cough medicines usually do not help alleviate the cough.

If your child has been around someone with pertussis, s/he might become sick with the disease. This is especially true if your child is not up-to-date with his/her pertussis vaccine shots. Even if your child's shots are up-to-date, s/he might still get pertussis.

If your child has been in contact with someone with pertussis, antibiotics prescribed by your doctor may prevent him/her from becoming ill. If your child is already sick, giving antibiotics early can help your child get well faster and lower the chances of spreading the disease to others.

Please consider the following New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services recommendations:

1. Infants under one year old, especially those under six months, are most likely to have severe symptoms if they develop pertussis. When possible, young infants should be kept away from people with a cough. Infants with any coughing illness should be seen promptly by their doctor.
2. Pertussis vaccine has until recently, been given only to children under 7 years old. However, a new adolescent and adult pertussis booster vaccine is now available for person's ages 10 – 64 years. If you have children who have not been completely immunized against pertussis (particularly infants under one year) we recommend you now talk to your child's doctor about the benefits of vaccination.
3. If your child comes down with cold symptoms that include a cough, talk to your child's doctor immediately. Tell the doctor that a suspected case of pertussis has been identified at your child's school.
4. It is generally recommended that those persons having close contact with a pertussis case receive antibiotics from their doctor to help prevent them from getting pertussis.
5. Do not send your child to school if s/he has any signs or symptoms of pertussis.

As a precautionary measure, our classrooms will be thoroughly cleaned. We continue to monitor the situation at school; if additional actions to control the spread of pertussis among pupils become necessary, we will notify parents.

If you have general concerns or questions about pertussis, contact your local health department at (856) 374-6600. If you have specific concerns or questions about your child's health, contact your health care provider.

Sincerely,

Marianne W. Gaffney, Ed. D.

**New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services
Communicable Disease Service
Vaccine Preventable Disease Program (VPDP)**

**Pertussis Fact Sheet
(Whooping cough)**

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious disease involving the respiratory tract. It is caused by a bacterium that is found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. Approximately 200 cases are now being reported annually in New Jersey. In 1999, there were only 30 cases compared to 223 cases in 2004, representing an increase of 643 percent over that period. The reasons for this increase are likely to be multifactorial and include improvements in diagnosis and reporting of cases.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Although most of the reported cases occur in children under five years, the number of cases among adolescents and adults is increasing. Pertussis most often affects persons without any pertussis vaccination, those persons with incomplete vaccinations, and those adolescents or older persons who were previously vaccinated as children.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is primarily spread through the air by close contact or by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat of infected individuals. Older siblings who have the bacteria in their nose and throat can be a source of disease in the home and infect an infant in the household.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially, symptoms resemble those of a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and mild cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of numerous rapid coughs (called paroxysms) followed by a crowing or high-pitched whoop. These episodes may recur for one to two months, and are more frequent at night. Older people or partially immunized children can have milder or less specific symptoms.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually 7 to 10 days after being exposed to an infected person but may be as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

A person can transmit pertussis from onset of symptoms to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. Pertussis is most infectious to others during the earliest stages of illness. The period of communicability can be reduced to five days after antibiotic therapy is begun.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

Pertussis can be very difficult for a doctor to diagnose. A doctor or parent may think a child has pertussis because of the symptoms, but specific lab tests are the only way to be sure. To test for pertussis the nasal passages are swabbed, and nasal material on the swab is then examined in a laboratory for the presence of pertussis bacteria.

Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

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One attack of pertussis usually provides immunity for a long time, but second attacks occasionally occur.

What are the complications associated with pertussis?

Complications of pertussis may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, dehydration, seizures, brain damage, brief periods of absence of breathing and death.

How and when is the vaccine for pertussis given?

The vaccine for pertussis is usually given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. Immunization authorities recommend that DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis) vaccine be given at two, four, six and 15-18 months of age and between four and six years of age. An adolescent/adult Tdap booster dose was licensed for individuals ages 10-64 in 2005 and may soon be recommended for certain persons in the future.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

The single most effective control measure is immunizing as many individuals as possible against pertussis. Treatment of cases with certain antibiotics can shorten the contagious period. People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from children and infants until properly treated. Giving antibiotics to people who are close contacts of pertussis cases is also an important part of prevention.

New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services
Send questions or comments to: njhealth@doh.state.nj.us
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