

PERTUSSIS IN HUNTERDON

1/11/12

The Hunterdon County Division of Public Health reported today that it is investigating a number of pertussis cases in the county. As of today, seven confirmed and two probable cases have been reported, with an additional three now being studied. The cases, affecting individuals aged from four to 15 years old, are situated widely around the county.

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a serious bacterial infection of the respiratory tract. Pertussis is a contagious disease usually spread through the air by close, indoor, repeated contact with an infected person, typically by talking, coughing, or sneezing nearby.

“Because pertussis is infectious and can cause serious illness in infants and young children, state law requires local public health staff to immediately begin investigating cases,” advised Rose Puelle, PhD, head of the Public Health Preparedness team within the county Division of Public Health. “Our immediate goals are to verify the diagnosis of pertussis and to guide measures to be taken to reduce the spread of the disease in the community.”

A vital part of the investigations now underway is to identify close contacts of confirmed cases.

“Based on what we learn during the investigations, the communicable disease nurse or epidemiologist may recommend antibiotic treatment for specific individuals,” said Puelle.

The relatively low case count of the current pertussis incident helps the health team limit the number of calls required to thoroughly investigate the population possibly exposed. However, Puelle explained that during any investigation it is never completely out of the realm of possibility that a resident could get a call. If you are contacted by a county public health employee concerning the current pertussis investigation, your willingness to cooperate can help limit the spread of disease and protect those most vulnerable such as infants and young children. If you have questions about public health investigations, contact county public health staff in the preparedness or nursing programs at 908-788-1351 or 908-806-4570.

Pertussis starts with cold symptoms and a cough that gets progressively worse during the weeks that follow and can last for months. Symptoms usually include a long series of coughing fits that can be followed by whooping noises, vomiting, turning blue, or difficulty catching one's breath. Older children, adults, and very young infants may not exhibit the characteristic whoop sound. Coughing often intensifies at night, and cough medicines usually do not provide adequate relief. Symptoms and complications of pertussis generally are less apparent among older children and adults and may not be as severe in those who have received vaccinations.

Serious complications including pneumonia can result among all age groups. Although deaths related to pertussis are rare, they do occur, especially among young infants who have not yet started or completed the pertussis vaccinations. According to the Centers for Disease Control the younger the infant is with a pertussis infection, the more likely treatment in the hospital will be needed. For those infants less than 1 year of age who come down with pertussis, more than half must be hospitalized.

Pertussis can infect anyone. The best way to control the spread of pertussis to the most at-risk population is to make sure that all children under age seven receive all their pertussis vaccinations on time, and that adolescents and adults receive booster vaccinations.

Children should receive four doses of DTaP vaccine between 2-18 months of age and an additional dose before starting school. Adolescents and adults ages 10 to 64 can receive booster shots called Tdap to enhance their immunity. “Persons diagnosed with pertussis have to take the full course of antibiotics prescribed by their physician and remain isolated until they have completed five days of treatment in order to limit potential spread of the disease,” advised Cindy Barter, MD, county health division medical director. “Since pertussis can be sprayed into the air by those who are sick and coughing, it is important to stay home from school or work if you are ill.”

If you suspect that you or a family member have pertussis, consult your health care provider. Likewise, if you have a cough of seven days or longer with explosive or sleep-disturbing coughing spasms, contact your physician for possible laboratory testing and treatment. Information about pertussis in English and Spanish is available on the Division of Health's website at <http://www.co.hunterdon.nj.us/health.htm>.