Dear Parents and Staff,

Pertussis (whooping cough) The Darling Downs Public Health Unit has been notified of a case of pertussis (whooping cough) attending Warwick Central State School and I am writing to provide advice and to ask that you watch out for the symptoms of pertussis in yourself/ your child, especially over the next 3 weeks.

What is pertussis?
Pertussis is an infection of the throat that can cause bouts of coughing, and sometimes breathing difficulties and vomiting. It can be a very serious infection in small children. The illness can last for many weeks. It usually starts with a sniffle or a cold.

What should people sick with pertussis do?
If you/ your child develops symptoms, please visit your local doctor as soon as possible. While the pertussis vaccination greatly reduces the risk of disease, there is still a chance you/ your child could get pertussis even if fully vaccinated. If symptoms develop we recommend visiting your local doctor for testing and treatment even if you/ your child has been vaccinated. Your doctor can advise whether pertussis is likely and arrange for early treatment if needed. Treating people who have pertussis with antibiotics can stop the infection spreading, but is more effective if started early.

To help prevent this infection spreading, people who have been diagnosed with pertussis should not attend school until they have completed the first 5 days of a course of the recommended antibiotics. If antibiotics cannot be taken, then they must stay away for 21 days after the onset of any cough, or 14 days after onset of a paroxysmal cough, whichever time is earlier. If your doctor suspects that you/your child may have pertussis then it is important not to attend school until the results become available.

How is it prevented?
Vaccination is the most important way of reducing pertussis in our community. It is important to double check that your child is fully up to date with his or her immunisations against pertussis. If in doubt, please ask your doctor to check. There is also an adult vaccine available. For more information speak to your doctor.

Need more information?
For more information, Queensland Health has a Pertussis Fact sheet on its website. Go to www.health.qld.gov.au. You can also contact your GP or the Darling Downs Public Health Unit on 4699 8240.

Yours sincerely

Dr Penny Hutchinson
Public Health Physician
20/11/2014
Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Description

Whooping cough (or pertussis) is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. Whooping cough can affect people of any age. For adolescents and adults, the infection may only cause a persistent cough. However, for babies and young children, whooping cough can be life threatening. Complications of whooping cough in babies include pneumonia, fits and brain damage from prolonged lack of oxygen. Most hospitalisations and deaths occur in babies less than six months of age.

Symptoms

Whooping cough may start like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing and tiredness, and then the characteristic cough develops. These coughing bouts can be very severe and frightening, and may end with a crowing noise (the ‘whoop’). This occurs as air is drawn back into the chest, and can be followed by vomiting or gagging. During coughing attacks, a child’s breathing can be obstructed and they may become blue or stop breathing. Bouts of coughing may continue for many weeks even after treatment. Babies under six months of age, vaccinated children, adolescents and adults often don’t display the typical whoop.

Transmission

Whooping cough bacteria are highly infectious and are spread to other people by an infected person coughing and sneezing. The infection can also be passed on through direct contact with infected secretions from the mouth or nose. The time between exposure to the bacteria and getting sick is usually seven to ten days, but can be up to three weeks. A person is most infectious in the early stages of their illness. Unless treated with appropriate antibiotics for at least five days, a person is regarded as infectious for three weeks after the cough began.

Treatment

Treatment is a full course of antibiotics which reduces the time a person is infectious to others. Antibiotics need to be given within 21 days of the start of general symptoms or within 14 days of the start of coughing. Antibiotics may reduce symptoms if given early. Some people who have had close contact with an infected person may need to take antibiotics to prevent infection. This includes people at high risk of serious complications (eg. children aged less than six months and women near the end of their pregnancy) and others who live or work with people at risk.

Control

A person with whooping cough should stay away from work, school, preschool and child-care until they have had at least 5 days of their course of antibiotics, or until 21 days after the cough began. If people who have had close contact with an infected person are not fully vaccinated, they may need to stay away from places where there are young children or pregnant women. Your local doctor can provide advice on this.

Prevention

Immunisation is the most effective way to control whooping cough. Immunisation against whooping cough is recommended as part of the National Immunisation Program Schedule and the vaccine is funded for:

- Infants aged 2 months (vaccines due at 2 months can be given from 6 weeks), 4 months and 6 months
- Children aged 4 years (vaccines due at 4 years can be given from 3 years 6 months)
- Year 8 and year 10 students in the school based program (booster dose)
Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

To ensure full protection, it is important that your child receives all recommended doses of the vaccine at the recommended times. The whooping cough vaccine for children is given as one injection combined with some other childhood vaccines.

In 2014, Queensland will offer Year 8 students combined diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (dTPa) as part of the School Based Vaccination Program. Year 10 students are offered a booster currently, vaccination for this year level will cease at the end of 2015.

A booster dose is strongly recommended (but not funded) for pregnant women who haven't had a booster in the last five years. The vaccine can be given during the last trimester or as soon as the baby is born. A booster dose is also recommended (but not funded) for any other adults who want to reduce the risk of infection and haven’t had a previous booster in the last ten years. Vaccination is particularly important for people planning a pregnancy and people working with, living with or caring for babies under six months eg. healthcare workers, childcare workers, fathers and grandparents.

Like all medications, vaccines may have side effects. Most side effects are minor, last a short time and do not lead to any long-term problems. Possible side effects of whooping cough vaccine may include fever, redness and soreness or swelling where the injection was given, nausea, headache, tiredness and aching muscles. More serious side effects are extremely rare but can include severe allergic reactions. Contact your immunisation provider if you or your child has a reaction following vaccination which you consider serious or unexpected.

Help and Assistance

For further assistance, please contact your local doctor, community health centre or nearest public health unit. You can be immunised at your local doctor or medical centre. Check with your local council, community child health and community health centre regarding free immunisation clinics.

Related Content

- Having a vaccination what to expect fact sheet
- Communicable Disease Control Guidance and Information: A-Z  

Other Resources

- [13 HEALTH](call 13 43 25 84)

References


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