Whooping Cough (Pertussis) Information
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Whooping cough, or pertussis, is a serious illness caused by the bacterium Bordetella pertussis. In California in 2010, we have seen the worst epidemic of pertussis in 50 years. Though pertussis seems to cycle approximately every 5 years, resulting in increased cases during those periods, this cycle seemed to be particularly heavy.

The illness starts much like a common cold with runny nose and an initially mild dry cough. Usually there is very little or no fever. Over the course of about two weeks, however, the cough significantly worsens, resulting in fits or paroxysms of coughing that cause victims to feel breathless and exhausted. The cough can persist for weeks or months. In about 50% of cases, a “whooping” sound can be heard when the person finally is able to take a breath after coughing (to hear what whooping cough sounds like, go to www.soundsofpertussis.com). Some episodes may be severe enough to cause vomiting, broken ribs, cyanosis (turning blue), or even loss of consciousness due to the inability to take a breath. In babies, especially those less than 3 months old, the episodes can be deadly. In fact, in California this year, 8 babies (7 of whom were less than 2 months old) have died from pertussis.

Sounds scary, right? Well it is! But the good news is that this disease is preventable. Children are vaccinated against pertussis during their routine childhood immunizations. The DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis) vaccine is routinely given to infants at 2, 4, 6, and 15-18 months of age. A booster dose is given at 4-6 years of age. A child is not considered adequately protected against pertussis until they have completed the first 3 doses of the series. Children who receive at least 3-4 doses of the vaccine are 80-85% less likely to develop pertussis than are unvaccinated children.

Immunity from the vaccine, however, does not last a lifetime. In fact, most kids lose immunity by the time they have finished middle school. This waning immunity is likely the primary contributing factor to the current epidemic as well as to the periodic upswings in pertussis cases. Because of this, in 2005, a new vaccine targeted at adolescents and adults was developed. This vaccine, TdaP, is recommended for all people aged 7 years and older, who are not fully immunized, as a one-time dose in place of a routine booster dose of adult Td vaccine. All adolescents should receive this vaccine by 11-12 years of age even if they had received all early childhood vaccines. In fact, California will now require that all children entering 7th grade be vaccinated against pertussis or show proof of vaccination with TdaP after 7 years of age. The vaccine is also recommended for all women of childbearing age before, during, or immediately after pregnancy to protect their newborns. Other adults, including healthcare workers, who have contact with pregnant women or infants, need to be immunized as well. The only way to protect the most vulnerable infants is to prevent the illness in those people around them.

Treatment for pertussis consists of supportive care and antibiotics. Antibiotics do not shorten the course of the illness but rather prevent spread of the infection to other people.