

2008 Immunization Issue Brief

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

REVISED DRAFT

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough, medically known as pertussis, is a serious infection that spreads easily and causes severe coughing spells. Early symptoms of whooping cough are like the common cold. Whooping cough causes coughing that last for weeks, even months. Coughing spells can lead to problems breathing, eating and sleeping. A "whoop" sound may occur while gasping for breath during a bad coughing spell. Among adults and adolescents, whooping cough without the "whoop" is common.

Who is at risk for whooping cough?

Adolescents and adults are at risk for infection, because protection from childhood whooping cough vaccination wears off by the teen years. Babies under 12 months of age, who may not be fully vaccinated against whooping cough.

- Jeanne had been sick for a few weeks with a terrible cough when her then month-old son, Austin, began to cough too. His cough became so bad that he couldn't keep his formula down. Jeanne's pediatrician told her to take him to the emergency room. Austin was admitted to the hospital, and three days later one of his lungs collapsed. He was placed on life support – ventilators and a heart-lung bypass machine. He spent 75 days in intensive care and a total of 3 months in the hospital. At one point, Jeanne's family was told he had only a 10% chance of survival.
- **In West Virginia** a 29 day old baby died from whooping cough in 2004. The baby boy was born healthy, but in less than two weeks developed whooping cough that was transmitted from the baby's 19 year old mother. The baby was too young to have been vaccinated, but the mother could have been vaccinated.
- William's 14-year-old daughter, Sarah caught whooping cough from a friend on a ski vacation. He and the rest of his family were given antibiotics as soon as his daughter was diagnosed, but it was too late. Within a week William developed a severe cough. He tried everything to relieve his symptoms, including using a humidifier, nasal spray, aspirin, cough syrup and an inhaler, with very little success. He described his whooping cough as the worst sickness he has ever had. After 5 weeks with the illness, neither William nor Sarah had much relief. Six months after the first symptoms began; William still has a coughing spell once per day.

(OVER)

Fast Facts:

- Two-thirds of cases in 2005 were in adolescents and adults

- Protection from childhood whooping cough vaccination wears off by adolescence
- Whooping cough can be passed from adolescents and adults to vulnerable infants who have not yet received any or all of their vaccines
- A new booster vaccine called Tdap is available to protect adolescents and adults against whooping cough
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now recommends that adolescents age 11 to 18 receive a Tdap booster, which also protects against tetanus and diphtheria
- It is also recommended that adults ages 19-64 receive a single dose of Tdap for pertussis protection, especially those who have close contact with infants less than 12 months of age.

How can whooping cough be prevented?

Whooping cough is most contagious before the coughing starts, so the best way to prevent it is through vaccination. The whooping cough booster vaccine for adolescents and adults is called Tdap. The childhood vaccine is called DTaP. Both protect against whooping cough, tetanus and diphtheria. All adolescents and adults should receive the new whooping cough booster vaccine.

For More Information

About Tdap, contact:

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