

Monday, November 10, 2008

## **PERTUSSIS ON THE RISE – ARE YOU PROTECTED?**

**Indianapolis, IN** —Reports of pertussis have been on the rise across the United States. Pertussis, commonly known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory infection named for the “whoop” sound infected children make when struggling for breath between severe fits of coughing. While easily prevented through on-time childhood vaccination, the disease continues to affect all age groups, including teens and adults.

"Once a major cause of death in infants and a common cause of childhood illness, pertussis has made a strong comeback in this country," said Roland Grieb M.D., Chair of the Indiana Adult Immunization Coalition (IAIC). "We urge parents and health-care providers to ensure that infants and toddlers are up-to-date with recommend vaccinations, including the diphtheria, tetanus, and acellular pertussis (DTaP) vaccine. Without adequate protection, children are vulnerable to this and other serious, but preventable, diseases. Teens and adults also need the booster to prevent transmission to infants and young children"

Pertussis reached an all-time low, with only about 1,000 cases reported in 1976. Lately, reports of pertussis have been on the rise in all age groups, with more than 25,000 cases reported nationwide in 2005. Based on the latest available data, in 2005 there were 396 cases of pertussis in Indiana, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Children are routinely protected against pertussis with the DTaP vaccine beginning in infancy. Protection is achieved through a series of five vaccinations—it takes at least three doses of DTaP to protect an infant against pertussis, followed by additional booster doses at 15-18 months and 4-6 years of age.

Initial symptoms of pertussis are similar to the common cold (runny nose, sneezing, and a mild cough) but quickly progress to severe coughing spells, making it difficult to drink, eat, and even breathe. During an attack, infants and toddlers may vomit, gag, or turn blue from a lack of oxygen.

While pertussis can occur at any age, it takes the heaviest toll on unvaccinated and under-vaccinated infants and toddlers, who are especially vulnerable to severe illness, complications, and, in some cases, death. In fact, 90 percent of all pertussis-related deaths occur in infants under 12 months. This group is also more likely to be hospitalized with serious complications, including pneumonia, seizures, or swelling of the brain.

Health officials warn that thousands of cases of pertussis will continue to occur each year if high levels of vaccine coverage are not achieved. According to the CDC National Immunization Survey, in 2005 more than one quarter of children under two years of age were missing one or more recommended vaccine doses. In Indiana, an estimated 94% of children eligible to receive vaccinations did so.

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## **Pertussis Immunity Not Lifelong**

Because immunity from the childhood pertussis vaccine wanes over time, adults and adolescents are at risk for the infection, which is easily transmitted to infants and toddlers, especially by parents and siblings. Diagnosis of whooping cough, especially in these age groups, is difficult. If it is diagnosed, it is often not until weeks into the illness—potentially exposing many others to the infection.

A whooping cough booster vaccine called tetanus, diphtheria, and acellular pertussis (Tdap) became available in 2005 to protect adults and adolescents.

## **Childhood Vaccinations, a Community-Wide Concern**

Vaccination is cost-effective and has alleviated burdens on the health system. Before vaccines became available to protect children against whooping cough, there were more than 250,000 cases and 9,000 related-deaths reported annually. Since the vaccine became available in the US in the 1940s, the incidence of disease and its associated illnesses and deaths has declined significantly.

"The best way to protect children from infectious diseases like whooping cough is through on-time vaccination," said Grieb. "The success we've had in this country in reducing and, in some cases, eliminating these devastating diseases may give a false sense of security. The reality is these diseases can come back if vaccination levels are not kept up."

Making sure children receive timely vaccination against pertussis—and more than a dozen other vaccine-preventable diseases—is the best way to prevent or control future outbreaks. For more information, visit [immunizeinadults.org](http://immunizeinadults.org).