

Health Alert: Pertussis

Lexington-Fayette County Health Department

A story was recently published on Kentucky.com regarding a pertussis (whooping cough) outbreak in Montgomery County (Mt. Sterling). It is not uncommon for communicable diseases to pass between Montgomery, Fayette, and surrounding counties and this may hold true in this instance as well.

As of now, Fayette County has no active investigations of pertussis and there have been no confirmed cases since early this year. Fayette County typically has very few confirmed reports of pertussis each year but in recent years several regions in Kentucky have seen significant increases in their rates of pertussis. In fact, pertussis rates have steadily climbed over the past 20 years.

Please make staff aware of the signs and symptoms of pertussis (listed below) and report any suspected cases to the Epidemiology department at your local Health Department. In Fayette county, that number is 859-899-4238. If you are unsure of how to contact your local health department, call the **CCHC Helpline at 1-877-281-5277**. Heightened awareness and coordinated efforts can go far to prevent or lessen the extent of an outbreak.

Know the Symptoms

Pertussis can cause serious illness in infants, children and adults. The disease starts like the common cold, with runny nose or congestion, sneezing, and maybe mild cough or fever. Symptoms can also include vomiting and blueness of the skin. After 1-2 weeks, severe coughing begins. Infants and children with the disease cough violently and rapidly, over and over, until the air is gone from their lungs and they're forced to inhale with a loud "whooping" sound. Pertussis is most severe for babies; more than half of infants less than 1 year of age who get the disease must be hospitalized. About 1 in 5 infants with pertussis get pneumonia (lung infection), and about 1 in 100 will have convulsions. In rare cases (1 in 100), pertussis can be deadly, especially in infants.

How is it Spread?

People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. Many infants who get pertussis are infected by parents, older siblings, or other caregivers who might not even know they have the disease.

Incubation and Contagious Periods

Incubation period can vary from 6 to 21 days; usually 7-10 days. Contagious period is from the beginning of symptoms until 2 weeks after the cough begins, depending on age, immunization status, previous episodes of infection with pertussis, and antibiotic treatment. An infant who has had no pertussis immunizations may remain infectious for 6 weeks or more after the cough starts.

Exclusion

Pertussis is a highly communicable illness for which routine exclusion of infected children is warranted. Also exclude close contacts who are coughing until they receive appropriate evaluation and treatment.

Prevention

The best way to prevent pertussis is to get vaccinated. The recommended pertussis vaccine for children is called DTaP. This is a safe and effective combination vaccine that protects children against three diseases: diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis. For maximum protection against pertussis, children need five DTaP shots. Parents can also help protect infants by keeping them away as much as possible from anyone who has cold symptoms or is coughing.

Adults who didn't get Tdap as a pre-teen or teen should get one dose of Tdap instead of the Td booster. It can be given instead of their next regular tetanus booster (the Td shot that adults should get every 10 years.) The dose of Tdap can be given earlier than the 10-year mark, so it's a good idea for adults to talk to a healthcare provider about what's best for their specific situation.