

Chief Health Officer Alert Pertussis

March 2009

The number of notified cases of pertussis (whooping cough) has increased sharply in Victoria, with a 48% increase occurring between December 2007 and December 2008.

There was a notable increase in the number of cases aged less than 12 months, with 55 cases in 2008 compared with 25 in 2007. This increase is continuing in 2009.

Pertussis is most serious in babies under 12 months of age often requiring admission to hospital.

Around one in every 200 children under six months of age who catches whooping cough will die.

What can you do?

Pertussis booster vaccine

Please encourage those in the below groups to have an adult pertussis booster vaccine (combined with diphtheria and tetanus), providing they have previously completed a primary (childhood) course of vaccine:

- **Adults before planning pregnancy or for both parents as soon as possible after birth**
- **Adults working with or caring for very young babies, especially health-care workers and child-care workers**
- **Any adult wishing to protect themselves against whooping cough**

Transmission

Pertussis can be caught through coughs and sneezes from an infected person. Parents and family members are the main source of infection for babies.

Clinical features

Pertussis is a highly contagious disease that affects the air passages and breathing.

The disease causes severe coughing spasms. Between these spasms, the patient gasps for breath. Coughing spasms are often followed by vomiting and the cough can last for months.

It can lead to complications such as haemorrhage, convulsions, pneumonia, coma, inflammation of the brain, permanent brain damage, long term lung damage, and death.

Childhood Immunisation

Babies are at risk from birth as no pertussis protection is passed from mother to newborn infant.

Complete immunisation of children remains the most effective measure to control pertussis.

Pertussis vaccination is offered as part of the National Immunisation Program for children at 2, 4, 6 months, at 4 years and in year 10 of secondary school (or 15 years of age).

A child who has received less than three doses of a pertussis containing vaccine should be considered at risk of pertussis.

People become immune either through pertussis immunisation or by catching the disease itself, but protection is not life long and begins to wane after 6-10 years. Sometimes immunised people still contract pertussis, but they are likely to have a less severe illness.

All parents with children under eight years of age are urged to check their child's immunisations and catch up any missed doses if necessary with their doctor or council immunisation program.

Remember that pertussis (suspected or confirmed) is a notifiable disease under the *Health (Infectious Diseases) Regulations 2001*. Doctors and laboratories are required to notify cases within five days to DHS.

Notifications can be completed by post, by fax to 1300 651 170, completed online or telephoned to 1300 651 160.

If you require any further information, please call the Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit on 1300 651 160.

Yours sincerely



Dr John Carnie
Chief Health Officer