



January 20, 2012

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your child may have been exposed to a case of pertussis (whooping cough). Pertussis is a highly contagious disease that is spread through the air when an infected person sneezes or coughs. Pertussis begins with cold symptoms and a cough which becomes much worse over 1-2 weeks. Symptoms usually include a long series of coughs (“coughing fits”) followed by a whooping noise. However, older children, adults and very young infants may not develop the whoop. There is generally no fever. People with pertussis may have a series of coughs followed by vomiting, turning blue, or difficulty catching their breath. The cough is often worse at night and cough medicines usually do not help alleviate the cough. The disease can be very severe and, although deaths are rare, they do occur, especially in infants less than one year of age.

Sometimes a child can get sick with pertussis after being around someone with the illness. This is especially true when the child has not received all of his/her pertussis vaccinations.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health strongly recommends the following:

1. Infants less than one year of age, and particularly under six months, are most likely to experience severe illness if they develop pertussis. When possible, young infants should be kept away from people with a cough. Infants with any coughing illness should be promptly evaluated by their doctor.
2. Making sure that children receive all their shots on time is the best way to control pertussis in the future. Pertussis vaccine is only given to children under age 7 years. Children should receive four (4) doses of DTaP vaccine by 18 months of age and an additional dose of DTaP before they start school. If you have children less than 7 years of age who have not been completely immunized against pertussis (particularly infants under one year), we recommend that you promptly contact your child’s doctor to discuss getting your child vaccinated. Check with your pediatrician to see if your child is eligible for another dose of DTaP in the accelerated schedule. If you are not sure your child is properly immunized, promptly contact his or her doctor.
3. A combination tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccine (Tdap) is available for use in adolescents and adults. Tdap is routinely recommended as a one-time dose for all 11-18 year olds as well as adults through 64 years of age who have not previously received a dose. Tdap is licensed for 10 year olds; those who may have been exposed to pertussis may receive it now. There is no pertussis vaccine approved for adults aged 65 years and older.

4. If your child comes down with cold symptoms that include a cough, he/she should not attend day care until evaluated by his/her physician. Children with pertussis, if their medical condition allows, may return to day care five (5) days after starting the antibiotics and must continue taking the antibiotics until completed.
5. If your child is diagnosed with pertussis, all household members and other close contacts should also be treated with antibiotics regardless of their age or vaccination status.

If you or your doctor has a question about pertussis, please call the Pennsylvania Department of Health at 1-877-PA-HEALTH.