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Make a pledge to get pertussis shots, Oregon health officials say

Oregon state health officials are calling on teens and adults to make a pledge to protect the health of babies: Get vaccinated against pertussis (commonly called whooping cough) to avoid passing the illness to vulnerable infants.

Although infants are routinely vaccinated against pertussis, their immune systems are not mature enough to fully protect them until about 6 months of age. Also, they do not complete the first series of vaccinations until about 6 months. During that time they are vulnerable to infection from teens and adults who may carry the illness without realizing it.

Dr. Paul Cieslak, communicable disease manager with the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division, said the consequences can be severe. Almost half of the 342 infants diagnosed with pertussis in Oregon since 2000 have had to be hospitalized. Four infants in Oregon have died since 2003.

"We need to try to vaccinate everyone to minimize the likelihood that this will happen to other babies," Cieslak said. The key to protecting everyone in the community is "herd immunity," he said. When vaccination is widespread, diseases such as pertussis don't have an opportunity to travel through the population. In that way infants who are too young to be vaccinated are kept from harm.

For maximum protection, Cieslak recommends:

- Vaccinating children against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis at 2, 4, 6 and 15–18 months, and again at 4 years. DTaP is the name of the vaccine used for children under age 7.

- Vaccinating infants' parents and siblings (age 10 and older) with one dose of Tdap, a booster vaccine that helps protect adolescents and adults from getting pertussis and transmitting it to infants. Even adolescents and adults who don't typically come in contact with small children should be vaccinated.
- Vaccinating health care workers with Tdap to ensure they don't expose newborns and other vulnerable patients to pertussis.

Health officials estimate that only a quarter of Oregon teens have been vaccinated with Tdap.

Whooping cough is caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*, which is found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. The illness begins as a mild infection with symptoms resembling the common cold. However, with pertussis the cough becomes more severe and the coughing episodes more numerous. Infants and young children may have the high-pitched whoop produced when they try to take a quick, deep breath after the coughing fit. The cough can last for several weeks.

Infants younger than 12 months are at highest risk for severe pertussis, which can lead to hospitalization and even death. In 2004–05, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 66 deaths from pertussis. Children 3 months of age or younger accounted for 85 percent of these deaths. In 2008 175 cases in both adults and children were reported in Oregon.

Pertussis is highly contagious. Around 80 percent of non-immune household members will contract it from a member who is infected. The disease is common in the U.S. In 2008, the CDC recorded more than 9,000 cases. While this is down considerably from the 150,000 cases a year before the vaccine was available, it remains one of the most common vaccine-preventable childhood diseases in the country.

Cieslak said the success of vaccination programs has lulled some people into thinking childhood diseases are things of the past.

"During the past century pertussis was a major cause of childhood death," he said. "Widespread vaccination has dramatically reduced the number of cases. Because of this success, people tend to think old diseases like pertussis are no longer a threat. But they are still with us, so we have to stay on guard and keep our vaccination rates up."

Additional information about pertussis can be found on the Web at <http://oregon.gov/DHS/ph/acd/diseases/pertussis/pertussis.shtml>.

Information about the Oregon Immunization Program's Tdap project can be found at www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/imm/adults/Tdap.shtml.