



COUNTY OF ONSLOW

MEDIA RELEASE

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Health Department Warns Whooping Cough Cases Are on the Rise

The number of cases of pertussis, or whooping cough, is surging around the United States, and Onslow County has not been immune. "Last month, an infant from Onslow County had to be hospitalized for whooping cough. Now is the time for anyone who is around an infant to be immunized. Babies do not have immunity to this deadly illness since they cannot receive their first vaccination until they are several months old. The best way to protect young babies is to vaccinate the people in contact with the baby. Vaccination of parents, grandparents, siblings, and childcare providers creates a circle of protection around a young infant," explained Felicia Stewart, Communicable Disease Nurse Manager at the Onslow County Health Department.

"Half of all infants who contract pertussis will have to be hospitalized and 1 in 5 will get pneumonia. This is a very dangerous illness," said Francine Reeves, Director of Clinical Services at the Onslow County Health Department. "Parents should insist that anyone around their baby, including babysitters and childcare providers, is vaccinated," added Reeves. According to the CDC, the majority of infant deaths from pertussis occur in babies under 6 months old.

Pertussis is commonly referred to as whooping cough because of the characteristic "whoop" sound that people make during fits of coughing caused by the disease. It is a respiratory disease that is spread from person to person by being in close contact with someone with the disease who is coughing or sneezing. Pertussis starts out like a regular cold, with a low-grade fever, sore throat, or runny nose for a week, before progressing into the cough, which lasts much longer. "The cough can literally last for months," added Reeves. "People used to call it the '100-day cough.'"

Whooping cough is currently the only vaccine-preventable disease on the increase in the United States. Nationwide, cases of pertussis declined from the 1950's to low numbers in the 1980's. However, whooping cough cases have steadily increased each decade since the 1980's, and several states, including North Carolina, have had significant outbreaks this year. Over 25 counties in North Carolina have reported cases of whooping cough this year.

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The best preventative measure is vaccination. Because of the high communicability of pertussis and the serious risk it poses to infants and young children, the state is offering free whooping cough vaccines to all county residents over the age of 7 years. The usual charge for the vaccine is \$70. In addition to childhood vaccinations for pertussis, the health department also recommends pertussis vaccine for:

- Women who are pregnant or may become pregnant;
- All close contacts of infants under 12 months of age (parents, siblings, grandparents, household contacts, child care providers); and
- Anyone with a pre-existing, chronic respiratory disease, such as asthma or emphysema.

Occasionally, even vaccinated persons can still develop the disease. However, persons who have received vaccination against pertussis usually have much milder symptoms, their symptoms don't last as long, and they typically do not experience the most severe health outcomes that require hospitalizations and sometimes result in death, compared to persons who have not been vaccinated against the disease.

“Several years ago, North Carolina mandated that children entering the sixth grade be given a pertussis booster shot since immunity provided by the pertussis shots given to babies and younger children wears off after several years. Onslow County has one of the highest birth rates in the state, and we want to ensure that all of our babies, mothers, and others are protected from this serious illness,” stated George O’Daniel, Health Director for the Onslow County Health Department.

For more information about the pertussis vaccine or to schedule an appointment for a free immunization, please call 910-347-2154.

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