Pertussis Update

This is to let you know that there has been a confirmed case of pertussis (whooping cough) at your child’s school. Because of the holiday break in December into January, there was minimal exposure to your child. Although there are no recommendations for antibiotics for students or staff at this time, you should be aware of the signs and symptoms of pertussis. Please contact your child’s health care provider if he/she has a cough that isn’t getting better.

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (also called whooping cough) is a disease caused by bacteria that spreads from person to person with close contact. Pertussis is often mild in older children and adults, but can cause serious problems in infants.

Who gets pertussis?

In Massachusetts, pertussis is most common among people 10-20 years old who have lost the protection they got from childhood vaccines. Infants are also likely to get the disease since they are often too young to have full protection from the vaccine.

What are the symptoms?

Pertussis is a cough illness whose symptoms can range from mild to severe. It usually begins with cold-like symptoms, with a runny nose, sneezing and dry cough. The cough lasts for a week or two, then slowly gets worse. The next stage, which may last from four to six weeks, may be marked by coughing spells that are uncontrollable and may be followed by vomiting. Between spells, the person may appear to be well and usually there is no fever. These typical symptoms are more common in infants and young children. Vaccinated children, teens and adults may have milder symptoms that can seem like bronchitis.

How is pertussis spread?

The germs that cause pertussis live in the nose, mouth and throat and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. Other people can then inhale the germs in the droplets produced by the person with pertussis. Touching a tissue or sharing a cup used by someone with the disease can also spread the disease. The first symptoms usually appear 7 to 10 days after a person is exposed, although sometimes people do not get sick for up to 21 days after their last exposure.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

Pertussis can be very difficult to diagnose. A doctor may think a patient has pertussis based on their symptoms. But a culture, PCR, or blood test are the best ways to be sure. The culture or PCR is taken by swab from the back of the nose if the patient has been coughing for two weeks or less. In children 11 years and older, the blood test is taken when the cough has persisted for longer than two weeks and their Tdap was given more than 3 years ago.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Although DTaP vaccine (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis) usually provides adequate protection against pertussis to children, the effects of the vaccine wear off over time, leaving most teens and adults at risk of the disease. However, a vaccine for teens and adults, called Tdap, is recommended to give protection against pertussis in these age groups. Tdap is given as a single “booster” dose. If your child is older than 11 years of age and has not yet had a dose of Tdap, contact your healthcare provider to discuss receiving this vaccine.

Antibiotics are often given to help prevent illness in the contacts of someone with pertussis, or to decrease infectiousness in someone with pertussis. After 5 days of treatment a case is no longer contagious. At this time, there are no further recommendations for your child to receive antibiotics unless he has symptoms of pertussis.
Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Division of Epidemiology and Immunization

What should I do? If your child has experienced a prolonged cough illness, you should talk to your health care provider about having the child tested. Please contact your health care provider and bring this advisory with you.

Further recommendations may be made if additional cases are confirmed.

If you have any questions about pertussis, please call your local Board of Health or Massachusetts Department of Public Health Immunization Program at (617) 983-6800.

Mount View Middle School
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