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San Francisco Public Health Officials Respond to Spike in Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Officials Recommending Stronger Prevention for Pregnant Women in Third Trimester

San Francisco, CA— Another “old-fashioned” disease long considered by many to be under control through proper vaccination and to pose little, if any, threat to public health, has been hacking its way back into doctor’s waiting rooms and emergency departments with a renewed vengeance. “Whooping cough” or pertussis is on the rise in San Francisco as well as throughout the State of California where it has claimed the lives of five infants, all of whom were Hispanic and less than three months old. The last infant death in San Francisco due to whooping cough was in 2005.

“San Francisco is experiencing an alarming spike in the number of whooping cough cases in all age groups,” observed Dr. Susan Fernyak, Director of Communicable Disease Control and Prevention for the City’s Department of Public Health. “Because immunity to whooping cough diminishes each year—whether you have had the disease itself or have been immunized against it—the waning immunity in the population also makes whooping cough a difficult disease to control. For newborns and children under 12 months, it poses a special risk.”

Preliminary numbers in San Francisco show 26 suspected cases of whooping cough just in the first six months of this year, compared with only 20 suspected cases during the entire year in 2009 and 15 confirmed cases in 2008.

Public Health officials in San Francisco have come up with a series of recommendations and opportunities to help members of the public protect themselves and their families from whooping cough:

- The Department of Public Health issued a citywide Health Alert on June 24th to all of the City’s clinicians, advising them to be on the lookout for whooping cough symptoms in their patients and to promote immunization. Having a case of whooping cough does not provide lifetime immunity.
- Health officials are recommending that families create their own “cocoon” around children under 12 months old. This means protecting babies by making sure that all close contacts—care givers, family members, healthcare workers—have up to date whooping cough vaccinations. In order to support this recommendation, San Francisco health officials are recommending that everyone—including adults over 64 years of age—receive a Tdap (Tetanus-diphtheria-whooping cough) vaccine.
- The San Francisco Department of Public Health is encouraging pregnant women in their third trimester to get vaccinated. This recommendation goes beyond the State and CDC guidelines.
- The public can take advantage of a special \$30 savings in a Tdap combination vaccine for adults at the Adult Immunization Clinic, 101 Grove St. For information, go to <http://www.sfcdcp.org/aitcappointments.html>, or call 554-2625.
- To increase the number of adults who are current with their whooping cough vaccine, San Francisco General Hospital Emergency Department is giving the Tdap vaccine to many patients who would have previously been given just a Tetanus booster.

In explaining why the immunization focus is on adults as well as children, Dr. Fernyak observed that, “What makes whooping cough so challenging is that when adults get it, it tends to be a mild version of the disease. But when newborns get whooping cough, it can be fatal. Right now, adults are the population perpetuating the disease and young children and infants are the ones who are most critically affected by it. It’s time for everyone to get re-vaccinated.”

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