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Press Release

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Cough That Won't Quit? Think Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY – The number of local pertussis (whooping cough) cases has increased dramatically in recent months. Since September 1st, the Public Health Division has received 66 reports of suspected and confirmed whooping cough cases, with most cases associated with school outbreaks. The Public Health Division is managing the outbreaks through communication with schools, families, and clinicians; investigation of cases; and recommendations to control spread.

As we enter the holiday season with many residents traveling and gathering with family and friends, the Public Health Division would like to share the following information to help prevent the spread of whooping cough:

1. Overview of Symptoms & Complications
2. How It Is Spread
3. What to Do if You're Sick
4. Prevention

Overview of Symptoms & Complications

In its early stages, whooping cough appears to be nothing more than the common cold. Healthcare professionals often do not suspect or diagnose it until the more severe symptoms appear.

After 1-2 weeks, violent coughing fits, vomiting after coughing, gasping for air (the “whoop” sound), and exhaustion often occur. Complications can include cracked ribs, abdominal hernias, and broken blood vessels in the skin or eyes.

Babies often have no cough. About half of babies less than 1 year old who get the disease need to be hospitalized. Complications in babies can include pneumonia, seizures, brain damage, and death.

How It Is Spread

Whooping cough is highly contagious and spreads easily through the air when a person who has the disease breathes, coughs, or sneezes. A person can spread the disease from the very beginning of sickness and for at least 3 weeks after coughing starts.

Many babies who get whooping cough are infected by older siblings, parents, or caregivers who might not even know they have the disease.

While it is less likely, a vaccinated person can become infected with whooping cough. People who have been vaccinated often have a milder illness than someone who is unvaccinated.

What to Do if You're Sick

If You Have Symptoms

- Consider visiting the doctor for a cough illness when the cough becomes more severe, even if the ill person has been vaccinated against whooping cough in the past.
- Whooping cough is treated with antibiotics, and early treatment is important to prevent complications and further spread to others.
- A person is contagious until they have taken a full course of antibiotics, and should not attend school, work or other group activities until treatment is complete.

If You Know You Were Exposed

- If you or your child have symptoms and have been exposed to someone diagnosed with whooping cough:
 - a. See your doctor for a medical evaluation.
 - b. If you have received an Exposure Notice for whooping cough, bring the Exposure Notice with you to your medical appointment.

Prevention

The most effective way to prevent serious illness from whooping cough is vaccination. Vaccination typically offers good protection against whooping cough within the first few years, but then protection decreases over time. Therefore, children should receive all doses of whooping cough vaccine and adolescents and adults should receive a booster vaccination during their lifetime.

For babies, whooping cough is very serious and can be deadly. To protect babies, pregnant women should be vaccinated against whooping cough in the third trimester of every pregnancy. Parents can vaccinate babies against whooping cough as early as 6-8 weeks of age.

Remember these habits to help prevent the spread of whooping cough, flu, and other respiratory diseases:

1. Wash hands with soap and water for 15-20 seconds every time (sing the whole ABC song to make it to 20 seconds).
2. Cough and sneeze into your elbow rather than your hand, and teach children to do the same.
3. **If you or your child are sick, stay home from work or school to prevent others from getting sick.**

For more information, go to: <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/>

For public health questions call the Communicable Disease Unit at (831) 454-4114.

For other health advisories and alerts visit www.santacruzhealth.org/alerts

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