



West Boca Pediatrician Warns of Latest Whooping Cough Risk

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A 2-month-old baby in Palm Beach County died the first week in September from whooping cough.

"We're still investigating how the baby got it," Tim O'Connor, a spokesman for the Palm Beach County Health Department told the *Sun Sentinel*. "The assumption is a family member or some adult passed it along."

"Florida has seen a steady rise in cases over the past decade, from 67 in 2000 to a record 497 in 2009, then down to 329 last year. So far this year, whooping cough is up by about 10 percent to 227 cases," according to the *Sentinel*. "Palm Beach has had 16 cases so far this year, up from four during the same period last year."

Dr. Anwar Vardag, director of the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at West Boca Medical Center, talked to *Forum* about what parents and other caregivers can do to protect children against this highly contagious respiratory tract infection.

I thought the threat of this illness was over decades ago, after the vaccines were discovered. Aren't the current drugs working anymore?

We never get lifetime immunity. That's the reason we keep giving those vaccines. The vaccinations have gone through phases and we're now using DTaP, diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis [another term for whooping cough]. Immunization usually starts at 2 months, then at 4 and 6 months, then 15 to 18 months and 4 to 6 years of age. Ten years later you have no immunity left.

What happens after that?

If someone has been exposed, they need to be looked at for the number of vaccines. Children 7 years or younger need a booster, but only if they had an exposure.

What are the complications?

Complications in children include ear infections, pneumonia, slowed or stopped breathing, dehydration, seizures and brain damage.

What do you tell parents?

The No. 1 and most important factor in reducing incidence is having children immunized. If you don't, the child will be susceptible, and if he gets infected he will spread the infection in school, day care and the family. He becomes a risk to the people around him.

Are you finding that some parents are not vaccinating their children out of fear?

I see children on breathing machines, so I see the most severe cases. I can tell parents from first-hand knowledge that infants get very sick and babies less than 6 months old are at very high risk. There are 60 million cases worldwide and a half-million die. So this is a staggering number. Reason again, the vaccination makes a tremendous difference.

What about adults?

It doesn't confine adults to bed, or send them to the hospital, but it's a highly contagious disease and it's under reported in the adult population. The last vaccination probably was given to that adult at 6 or 7, so immunity has completely waned from the system.

What are the symptoms in an adult?

A chronic cough. Spasmodic cough without any fever or headache or muscles aches and pains. Family practitioners and internists can test them accordingly. Treat with antibiotics. It's not as fatal in adults unless have they have a chronic lung disease or heart disease.

Bottom line for parents: What should they do?

We want parents to stay on top of shots, and if the baby gets whooping cough not to wait at home. Bring the baby to a physician or the ER. We are urging parents to weigh the complications and to vaccinate. It's not only good for them and their child, but the rest of the people who live around them.