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Protect newborns from whooping cough

Queensland Health is warning parents and family members to keep their whooping cough vaccinations up-to-date, to avoid placing newborn babies at risk of the serious infection.

Queensland Health's Senior Director of Communicable Diseases Dr Christine Selvey said whooping cough can be life threatening for babies under 12 months of age.

"Whooping cough can affect babies, children and adults," Dr Selvey said.

"While the infection may cause a persistent cough in adolescents and adults, whooping cough in young children can obstruct breathing, resulting in a lack of oxygen and even death.

"Babies under six months are the most vulnerable as they would not yet have had three whooping cough vaccinations."

Dr Selvey said there had been an increase in the number of cases of whooping cough in Queensland, particularly in babies under six months of age.

Latest figures show Queensland Health has been notified of 36 cases of whooping cough in babies aged under six months this year. During the same period in 2007 there were 14 cases and 17 in 2006.

So far in 2008, Queensland Health has been notified of 1700 whooping cough cases in people of all ages. This compares with 1423 notifications for the same period in 2007, and 2046 for the same time period in 2006.

Dr Selvey said some other Australian states had experienced a greater increase in notifications in babies aged under six months.

"The infection is often spread to babies from parents and family members who are not immunised," Dr Selvey said.

"Unfortunately, immunity from vaccination wanes with time, so adults require a booster, even if they were vaccinated as children."

"We particularly encourage new parents, couples planning a pregnancy, and adults and young people who are in close contact with babies to get vaccinated if they have not done so in the past ten years."

Whooping cough, or pertussis, is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by bacteria.

"People should also be aware of the symptoms that might start like a cold, with a runny nose and sneezing, before a cough develops, and seek treatment early to reduce the spread of infection to others," Dr Selvey said.

Vaccination is the best protection against whooping cough. Doctors recommend vaccinating babies at two, four and six months, with a booster at four years of age. These vaccinations are provided free of charge at community child health clinics.

Doctors also recommend a booster dose for adolescents, which is provided free for students in year 10 through the school-based vaccination program.

These vaccines are provided free as part of the National Immunisation Program.

New parents, couples planning a pregnancy, and adults and young people who are in close contact with babies should see their GP for a single booster dose.

Ends.

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