



MDH reports pertussis-related death of infant

Health officials stress importance of vaccination, especially during pregnancy

1.8.20 Minnesota health officials have confirmed an infant death related to pertussis, also known as whooping cough. The infant was diagnosed with pertussis in August 2019 and died in November after being hospitalized for three months. The last pediatric death related to pertussis in Minnesota was in 2013.

“We were extremely saddened to hear that this child passed away,” said Kristen Ehresmann, director of infectious disease at the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). “Pertussis continues to be a concern in Minnesota, and we want to do everything we can to prevent future tragedies like this.”

Anyone can get pertussis, but it is most severe in infants. Preliminary data for 2019 shows there were 25 cases of pertussis in infants less than 6 months old in Minnesota. Of those, eight were hospitalized, and two of the hospitalized cases were severe.

“Infants who get pertussis can get very sick and many need to be hospitalized,” said Ehresmann. “The severe cases often require lengthy hospital stays with weeks to months in an intensive care unit. It can be devastating for the family.”

Health officials are emphasizing the importance of vaccination, especially during pregnancy, to help prevent pertussis. The tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis, or Tdap, vaccine is recommended during the third trimester of each pregnancy. This recommendation has been around since 2012.

Ehresmann explained that when the Tdap vaccine is given during pregnancy, the mother’s body creates antibodies to fight off the pertussis bacteria. Some of those antibodies are passed to the baby before birth and offer short-term protection until the baby can start to receive their own vaccines.

In 2018 and 2019, Minnesota had 41 cases of pertussis among infants less than 6 months of age. Upon review, only 18 (44%) of the mothers received Tdap during pregnancy.

“We’re missing opportunities to vaccinate during pregnancy and protect vulnerable infants from a serious disease,” said Ehresmann. “We are working with partners to make sure health care providers and pregnant women have the information they need to ensure on-time vaccination with this safe and effective vaccine.”

Many infants who get pertussis are infected by older siblings, parents or other caregivers. These people often do not know they have the disease because symptoms can be less severe in adolescents and adults.

There are two pertussis vaccines, and your age determines when you get each vaccine. The diphtheria, tetanus and acellular pertussis, or DTaP vaccine, is given to children starting at age 2 months. The Tdap vaccine is given to adolescents at age 11-12 years and adults. Families should talk to their health care provider to see what vaccines they need and when. People who have completed some or all of the recommended vaccinations for pertussis may still get the disease but will generally have a milder illness.

Other things you can do to prevent the spread of pertussis are:

- Avoid close contact with others who are coughing or otherwise ill.
- Wash your hands often.
- Stay home if you are sick.
- Cover your cough with a tissue or cough into your sleeve.
- Seek medical attention if you or a family member have been coughing for more than seven days and it is not getting better.

Pertussis is a very contagious disease caused by a bacterium that affects the lungs and airways. It spreads by coughing or sneezing.

The first symptoms of pertussis are similar to a cold: sneezing, a runny nose, possibly a slight fever, and a cough. After one or two weeks, the cough becomes more severe. Infants and children with pertussis can cough violently until the air is gone from their lungs and they're forced to inhale with a loud "whooping" sound. The coughing fits usually last from one to six weeks, but can go on for 10 weeks or more.

Health care providers should consider pertussis as a diagnosis in patients with a persistent cough illness and check vaccination history at each visit.

For more information, go to [Pertussis \(Whooping Cough\)](#).

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