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Our Ref:



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Darling Downs Public Health Unit

Darling Downs Hospital and Health Service

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Dear Parents and Staff,

Pertussis (whooping cough) The Darling Downs Public Health Unit has been notified of a case of pertussis (whooping cough) attending St Joseph's College in Toowoomba and I am writing to provide advice and to ask that you watch out for the symptoms of pertussis in yourself/ your child, especially over the next 3 weeks.

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (or pertussis) is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. Whooping cough can affect people of any age.

What are the symptoms?

Whooping cough often starts like a cold with a runny nose, sneezing and tiredness over several days, and then the characteristic coughing bouts develop. These bouts can be very severe and frightening, and may end with a crowing noise (the 'whoop') as air is drawn back into the chest. Coughing episodes are frequently followed by gagging or vomiting. During coughing attacks, a child's breathing can be obstructed and they may become blue or stop breathing. The bouts of coughing may continue for many weeks even after appropriate treatment. Babies under six months of age, vaccinated children, adolescents and adults may not display the typical whoop. Whooping cough can be life threatening in babies. Even in adults, pertussis can cause significant problems with the cough persisting for up to 3 months, and other symptoms, such as sleep disturbance or, rarely, rib fracture.

What should people sick with pertussis do?

If you/ your child develops symptoms, please visit your local doctor as soon as possible. While the pertussis vaccination greatly reduces the risk of disease, there is still a chance you/ your child could get pertussis even if fully vaccinated. If symptoms develop we recommend visiting your local doctor for testing and treatment even if you/ your child has been vaccinated. Your doctor can advise whether pertussis is likely and arrange for early treatment if needed. Treating people who have pertussis with antibiotics can stop the infection spreading, but is more effective if started early.

To help prevent this infection spreading, people who have been diagnosed with pertussis should not attend school until they have completed the first 5 days of a course of the recommended antibiotics. If antibiotics cannot be taken, then they must stay away for 21 days after the onset of any cough, or 14 days after onset of a paroxysmal cough, whichever time is earlier. If your doctor suspects that you/your child may have pertussis then it is important not to attend school until the results become available.

How is it prevented?

Vaccination is the most important way of reducing pertussis in our community. It is important to double check that your child is fully up to date with his or her immunisations against pertussis. If in doubt, please ask your doctor to check. There is also an adult vaccine available. For more information speak to your doctor.

Need more information?

For more information, Queensland Health has a Pertussis Fact sheet on its website. Go to www.health.qld.gov.au. You can also contact your GP or the Darling Downs Public Health Unit on 4699 8240.

Yours sincerely

Dr Penny Hutchinson
Public Health Physician