



PRESS RELEASE

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AWARENESS ON WHOOPING COUGH (PERTUSSIS)

Gibraltar is currently experiencing a rise in cases of whooping cough in infants, very similar to what is happening in the UK. Since the start of the year, 3 babies have been admitted to St. Bernard's Hospital with whooping cough, compared to only 12 cases in the whole of the previous seven years. Whooping cough is a cyclical disease and increases are usually seen every three to four years. The last peak year was 2008 and it appears that this year 2012 might be one too.

Whooping cough, also known as Pertussis, is a respiratory infection caused by bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. It usually begins with quite mild non-specific symptoms, which develop over one to two weeks into coughing fits, which can be severe. The disease affects all ages, but is particularly serious in infants who have the highest risk of severe complications and death. Appropriate antibiotic therapy used early in the course of the illness reduces the duration, severity and period of infectivity of the illness. Young infants usually need hospital care due the risk of severe complications.

An effective vaccine exists, which gives strong protection and is given to all babies in Gibraltar as part of the routine childhood programme starting at 2 months of age, which is why the actual disease in our society is quite uncommon. However, since the vaccine cannot be given before the age of 2 months and immunity does not fully establish until 4 months, the babies most at risk are those under 4 months of age.

There is some emerging concern that the immunity after the vaccine might not last lifelong and experts are looking at the use of additional boosters to maintain immunity. At present, a few adults still catch whooping cough even if they had the immunisation as children. Fortunately, whooping cough in older ages does not usually lead to serious complications, but such infection can still spread easily to close contacts such as household members. Small babies are most at risk from catching the disease from older persons who are infected at the time of contact with the baby.

WHAT THE PUBLIC NEED TO DO:

- If your infant is showing signs and symptoms, which include severe coughing fits accompanied by the characteristic “whoop” sound, you should take the child to the Emergency department or the Emergency doctor.
- Ensure as parents that your children are up to date with all their vaccinations so that they are protected at the earliest opportunity. If in doubt, speak to the Immunisation Nurse at the Primary Care Centre.
- Do not allow your child to miss the pre-school booster. This not only boosts protection in your child but also reduces the risk of them passing the infection on to small babies, who cannot be fully protected by the vaccine till they are four months old.
- If adults or older children are experiencing cough over a long period, they may have whooping cough. While the illness is not serious for them, they could spread it to infants and should therefore consult their family doctor.
- If you have a cough, avoid contact as far as possible with a child who is less than four months of age, most particularly a newborn child.
- Remember the message “Cough into Your Sleeve”. Do not cough into your hands – as people often do – because this can spread germs by contact. Instead, cough into a disposable tissue or if one is not handy, cough into your sleeve or a washable part of your clothes.

For more information about the vaccination programme for children, contact the Immunisation Clinic on 20072355.