

News Release

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Local parents informed of pertussis at elementary school

The Knox County Health Department is investigating a case of pertussis at a Mount Vernon elementary school. A letter was emailed Thursday afternoon to parents and guardians of students at Wiggin Street Elementary in Gambier.

Pertussis, commonly referred to as whooping cough, a highly contagious respiratory infection that can be very serious especially for infants and young children and anyone with a compromised immune system.

The letter to parents was a cautionary step to inform parents and identify other affected students who could be treated quickly to reduce the severity of the infection.

Pertussis usually starts with symptoms that resemble a common cold such as a sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more frequent and is characterized by episodes of severe coughing followed by a crowing or a high-pitched whoop, hence the illness gets its nickname, “whooping cough.” A thick, clear mucous may be discharged with the coughing and vomiting may occur after the coughing spells. These episodes may recur for one to two months and are more frequent at night.

Children exhibiting these symptoms should see a doctor as soon as possible. “Like a common cold, the illness basically has to “run its course,” but antibiotics are available to cut the severity and stop the spread of the illness to others,” said Lorraine Bratton, RN, with the Knox County Health Department.

A person can spread pertussis from the onset of symptoms to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. The period of communicability can be reduced to five days after appropriate antibiotic therapy is begun.

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The pertussis vaccine is administered as part of the required immunization schedule for children before they enter school. With age, protection from the vaccination wanes, leaving adolescents and adults vulnerable so there is a booster shot available to children, ages 11 through 18. The booster shot is strongly recommended also for parents of young children and those who take care of young children such as day care workers and grandparents.

Parents can opt-out of the vaccine requirement although the Ohio Revised Code stipulates that students with pertussis should not be in school and must take antibiotics for five days before returning to school. For parents who refuse the antibiotic treatment for their children, the law indicates that the health department can prohibit the student from returning to school for up to three weeks.

For more information, contact Lorraine Bratton, RN at the Knox County Health Department at 740-399-8003.

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