

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Several Factors Contributing to California's Record-Breaking Whooping Cough Epidemic

Reported/Produced by: Mina Kim
Publication: *California Healthline*
Date posted: October 20, 2010

Text:

California is suffering its worst epidemic of pertussis, or whooping cough, in 60 years, and doctors and health officials are suggesting a variety of causes. This is a special report for California Healthline, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Mina Kim.

Whooping cough has infected more than 5,600 people in California. That's the most since 1950, according to the California Department of Public Health. The illness has killed nine infants this year. Typically, it claims an average of three lives annually, says Kathleen Harriman, DPH's chief epidemiologist for vaccine-preventable diseases. She says a combination of factors could be behind the high numbers.

(Harriman): "Number one, pertussis is a cyclical disease anyway, and we expect peaks every 2 to 5 years, and the way that happens is that pertussis has never gone away because neither the vaccine nor the disease provides lifetime immunity."

Improved scientific methods for detecting the disease could also be increasing the number of reported cases. Still, Harriman says the sheer volume of cases has been very surprising. And she says a growing number of parents refusing to vaccinate their children aren't helping matters. In Marin County near San Francisco, about 13% of parents refused vaccination for their kindergartners in 2009. DPH data show that Marin had one of the highest rates of pertussis infection this year. Yvonne Maldonado is a professor of pediatrics at Stanford University and an attending physician at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital. She says one of the reasons parents are shunning vaccines is that the vaccine has been so effective that they don't see a need.

(Maldonado): "If you look at vaccine-preventable diseases in the U.S. we have either eradicated or substantially reduced these over the last 40 or 50 years and what we're seeing is families and even physicians who have not even seen these diseases, so in a sense they are victims of their own success."

Maldonado is part of a study examining whether training programs are giving pediatricians the skills necessary to talk to parents effectively about immunizations. She says celebrity, anti-vaccine crusaders are stoking parents' fears about the safety of vaccines. Actress Jenny McCarthy for example, claims vaccines gave her son autism.

(Maldonado): "We're all kind of not very exciting people this is our job, we feel devoted to it. But you get one Jenny McCarthy or one really flashy celebrity and they can pretty much voice over anything some of us have to say."

Some health officials in the San Francisco Bay Area are considering trying to tighten the requirements for parents to opt out of vaccinations. Currently, California law only requires that parents sign a personal belief exemption that states immunizations are contrary to his or her beliefs. But James Cherry, professor of pediatrics at UCLA, says a bigger problem than adults refusing to vaccinate their kids, is that adults themselves aren't getting vaccinated. Cherry has studied whooping cough for more than 30 years and was involved in vaccine trials in the 1970s. He says the pertussis booster shot, or Tdap, is critical because the vaccine wears off over time, putting infants for whom the disease is life threatening, at risk.

(Cherry): "If we could get a schedule like the schedule recommended for diphtheria and tetanus which is every ten years for adults, so if we could the five doses in children, a dose in adolescents and then every ten years, I think that might control the disease and would certainly control spread to young babies."

Only about 43% of adolescents in California get a booster shot, according to a 2008 study by CDC. Cherry suspects the percentage is even lower among adults, particularly since the Tdap booster has only been available since 2005. In September, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a law requiring students from seventh to twelfth grade to show proof they received a pertussis booster by next fall. In July 2012, only seventh graders will have to show proof. Cherry says, that's a start.

(Cherry): "The reservoir is adults of all ages, so the bigger public health challenge is finding a way to routinely vaccinate adults, and we're nowhere near that."

One potential bright spot: California Department of Public Health officials say the disease peaks in late summer and fall and they expect the number of pertussis cases to begin to decline.

This has been a special report for California Healthline, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Mina Kim, thanks for listening.