

MEDIA RELEASE

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Whooping cough outbreak: Babies and infants most at risk if not immunised

Dr Andrew Lindsay, Medical Officer of Health with the Nelson Marlborough Public Health Service, urges parents and caregivers of young children, pregnant women and every person who has close contact with young children or pregnant women to check their whooping cough (pertussis) vaccination status and get vaccinated as soon as possible before heading off for holiday travel and family events.

“The whooping cough outbreak continues in the Nelson Marlborough region and has been declared a national outbreak,” Dr Lindsay says.

“In our region we have seen a recent increase in the number of whooping cough notifications for infants less than one year-old. This is very concerning because infants are most likely to suffer the worst outcomes of pertussis – and possibly death.”

Dr Lindsay says that whooping cough is highly contagious, spread by droplets in the air when people sneeze or cough. This means that people are vulnerable to catching the disease on occasions when large groups of people get together – at Christmas parties and lunches for example.

“It’s difficult to avoid catching it if one person at a Christmas party or family gathering is contagious. And with holiday-related travel involving people from, or locals returning from, other parts of New Zealand where whooping cough is present, it is possible that more cases may appear in our district.

“It is important that we do all we can to protect the most vulnerable to the worst outcomes of whooping cough. The best way to do this is to vaccinate against this awful disease. They should also act on any symptoms immediately and, if symptomatic, to stay away from young children and pregnant women.

“If you are a parent who has previously declined vaccination for your children, please urgently reconsider your choice and protect your children from contracting this serious disease.”

Prevention: Vaccination info

Vaccination is free for:

- babies and infants at ages 6 weeks, 3 months, and 5 months
- older children aged 4 years and 11 years
- pregnant women between 28 – 38 weeks gestation

In addition to this, vaccination is encouraged for:

- pregnant women. If vaccinated between 28 and 38 weeks of pregnancy, a mother can pass her immunity on to the baby, helping protect them until they are old enough to be vaccinated themselves. Immunising against whooping cough during pregnancy protects about 90% of babies in their first few weeks of life.

- parents and caregivers of children under one year-old, and for all members of a household where babies and infants live
- Here is the Ministry of Health’s vaccination information, including information about vaccine ingredients, precautions, efficacy and adverse reactions:
https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/imm-handbook-14-pertussis-may17_1.pdf

Outbreak update: The numbers

The Nelson Marlborough Public Health Service continues to receive high numbers of whooping cough notifications. 161 suspected cases have been notified between 28 October and 11 December.

Of the 161 notifications:

- 28 cases have been confirmed, 52 classified as ‘probable’, 10 cases as ‘suspect’ and 71 are under investigation
- 107 notifications are from Nelson, 34 from Tasman and 20 from Marlborough
- 11 notifications are for cases are from infants less than one year-old. Notifications for this age group have increased in the last fortnight.
- the majority of notifications are among those aged 5-14 years and adults older than 45 years

Know the symptoms

Whooping cough is most infectious in the first two weeks. The symptoms usually appear around a week after infection and start just like a common cold – runny nose, sneezing, slight fever and a mild irritating cough.

After a week or two, coughing fits (paroxysms) are the main symptom. A paroxysm is characterised by:

- a spasm of coughing which brings up thick phlegm
- a sharp intake of breath or ‘whoop’ sound after a cough (mainly in children, not babies or adults)
- vomiting after coughing, especially in infants and young children
- tiredness and redness in the face from the effort of coughing.

If you suspect you or your children has whooping cough, call your GP or Healthline first

Whooping cough is very contagious, so please call your GP or Healthline (0800 611 116) first before going into the waiting room.

In waiting rooms, help prevent spreading whooping cough to others by:

- using a face mask if you are coughing (ask reception for one if they are not available in the entranceway)
- catching a cough or a sneeze in a tissue and then disposing of this
- coughing or sneezing into the crook of your arm (inner elbow) if you don’t have a tissue
- washing hands frequently.

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