



what is...
PERTUSSIS?

Recently I learned that my cousin's daughter in Gillette had come down with whooping cough, also known as pertussis. Due to an allergic reaction to her first dose of the pertussis vaccine, she is not able to maintain that protection. A growing number of parents have opted to avoid vaccines for their children over the last decade and many adults do not realize the vaccine needs to be boosted every 5 years or so. Those are just two of the reasons pertussis is making a comeback in our country, even here in Wyoming.

Pertussis is an airborne disease and is likely transferred to others when an infected person coughs or sneezes, perhaps well before they are aware of their own illness. When a person is exposed, they may develop symptoms within 5 days but it can also take up to 3 weeks. The vaccine is not 100% effective but those vaccinated, if they do develop symptoms, usually have a less severe case of this disease. In the case of my cousin's daughter, the entire household had to go on antibiotics, even though they were all immunized. People of all ages can catch pertussis but it is often much more dangerous to the very young.

Do you know the symptoms of pertussis? Early pertussis usually begins much like a common cold with the usual runny nose, mild cough and low fever. After a few weeks the cough can become much more severe. During this time a patient has paroxysmal coughing, making it hard to catch their breath between coughs. This is when the "whooping" sound begins, as the patient struggles to quickly inhale during the fits of coughing. The coughing can be exhausting and so severe as to cause vomiting.

This critical time can last 6 weeks, occasionally even longer. 2-3 more weeks of convalescence occur once the patient starts to recover. The coughing lessens but can continue to occur for weeks. It is a slow process to recover from pertussis.

We expect my cousin's daughter to fully recover. She is a high school senior and strong enough to get through this. Even so, she is at risk for complications such as broken ribs or passing out from the coughing. Infants and young children are at greatest risk for the most severe complications such as convulsions, pneumonia, infections spreading to the brain or even death. Persons with underlying respiratory or immunity problems also have an increased risk or complications. Approximately 1/2 of infants with pertussis will require hospitalization.

Pertussis can be treated with antibiotics to lessen the severity and to help reduce the risk of an infected person spreading the disease. Besides the regularly recommended childhood vaccinations for this disease, adults can receive booster vaccines as well. It is believed that pregnant women who receive a booster may be able to transmit that protection to their infants.

So, now you know a bit about pertussis. It is a disease to be taken seriously but thankfully there are steps to take to prevent or treat this disease. If you want to read more about it I'd direct you to seek out websites such as the Wyoming Department of Health, Mayo Clinic, or Medline Plus. I found much of the information in this article from the Center for Disease Control at <http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/>.

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