

## Save a Life: Prevent Whooping Cough

by Ann Gerhardt, MD

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Whooping cough is back and we need to prevent it with vaccination. It sounds like a silly disease, but it killed 10 infants in California in 2010 and sent hundreds of others to the hospital with debilitating illness.

This highly contagious disease, caused by Bordetella pertussis, is spread by droplet from coughs and sneezes. The cough can last for months. If it doesn't kill, it makes you miserable.

Pertussis starts insidiously, with congestion, runny nose, mild sore-throat and dry cough, and minimal or no fever. This lasts one to two weeks. The cough remains intermittent, but worsens to paroxysms of cough that don't allow you to catch a breath. At the end of the coughing spell, the big breath in sounds like a "whoop" and can be followed by vomiting. The coughing episodes increase in frequency and severity, often at night and can last for months, causing weight loss, sleep deprivation, nose bleeds, pneumothorax (ruptured lung), rib fracture, bleed into the head or eye, hernia or rectal and urinary problems. People who have been vaccinated experience more mild disease, without the whoop.

Whooping cough is easy to treat, with erythromycin, if it's diagnosed. But, since we don't automatically think of whooping cough when we get a "cold," it may take weeks of misery to get to a diagnosis.

We are immunized as children, but the immunity wears off with time. Infants get a series of vaccinations, starting at 2 months, with 4 boosters by 6 years. If adults or children whose immunity has waned contract the disease, they can expose infants and others with deficient immunity.

Because this seems to be happening, a new law in California requires that all students entering grades 7 through 12 will need proof of a pertussis booster vaccination before starting the 2011-2012 school year.

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The pertussis vaccine is available only in combination with tetanus and diphtheria vaccine. It is called Tdap, for Tetanus/diphtheria/acellular pertussis. Acellular means there is no live bacteria, so you have no fear of infection from the vaccine.

Regardless of when you received your last tetanus vaccine, the California Department of Public Health now recommends a Tdap booster for anyone over the age of 10 years. By boosting everyone, fewer become infected, thus reducing the risk of an epidemic and transmission to vulnerable infants. They especially urge on-time infant vaccination, and vaccination of people (especially healthcare workers) exposed to infants and young children.¶