

### **What is the issue?**

The South East Public Health Unit (SEPHU) has been notified of whooping cough (pertussis) outbreaks in several schools in its catchment. Notification data indicates that there has been an increase in cases notified to the Department of Health, with the majority of cases within the 10-to-14-year age group.

### **What is whooping cough (pertussis)?**

Whooping cough is a very contagious respiratory infection caused by the bacterium *Bordetella Pertussis*. The major symptom of whooping cough is the characteristic cough which is often followed by a 'whooping' sound (which is not always obvious) when breathing in. Cold like symptoms often precede the cough, and vomiting after coughing is common.

The bacterium is spread by airborne droplets from the upper respiratory tract (when the infected person coughs or sneezes). A person is infectious for the first 21 days of their cough or until they have completed an appropriate course of antibiotics. However, the cough may persist for up to 3 months, despite antibiotic treatment.

### **Who is most at risk?**

Babies under 12 months of age are most at risk and the infection can potentially be life-threatening for infants aged 6 months and under.

Household contacts and carers such as parents and siblings are often the source of infection in infants.

### **Is whooping cough preventable?**

Whooping cough is a vaccine-preventable disease and the vaccine is provided at no cost under the National Immunisation Program (NIP). Under the NIP, vaccination is recommended for children at 2,4,6, and 18 months and 4 years of age. Adolescents in Year 7 (or age equivalent) are also eligible for a booster.

Adults who have not had a dose in the last 10 years are recommended to have boosters. Routine boosters are recommended for certain adult cohorts and includes women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, healthcare workers, earlier childhood educators and carer and people in close contact with infants.

Pertussis-containing vaccines protect against severe and typical pertussis. Immunity after receiving a pertussis-containing vaccine does wane over time.

It is important for individuals to keep up to date with their vaccinations, including boosters.

### **What should schools do if there are reported cases of whooping cough among students and staff?**

As per the Public Health and Wellbeing Regulations 2019, Schedule 7, the minimum period of exclusion from primary schools and children's services for children diagnosed with whooping cough is 21 days after the onset of cough or until they have completed 5 days of a course of antibiotic treatment. Contacts aged less than 7 years in the same classroom as the case who have not received three doses of pertussis vaccine should be excluded for 14 days after the last exposure to the infectious case, or until they have taken 5 days of a course of effective antibiotic treatment.

Communication to the wider school community is beneficial for alerting them of cases and to present to their local health service for appropriate testing and treatment if they develop symptoms.

Schools may continue to notify SEPHU of cases and outbreaks at [sephu.trace@monashhealth.org](mailto:sephu.trace@monashhealth.org), or if assistance is required with managing the outbreak.