

News Release

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Pertussis situation upgraded to outbreak

Two additional children with connections to a confirmed case of pertussis and who are showing symptoms of the illness have been identified as probable cases, prompting local health officials to label the situation an outbreak. The children, ages six, seven and eight, attend Wiggin Street Elementary in Gambier and ride to and from school together.

The clinical definition of a school outbreak for pertussis is defined as “two or more cases clustered in time and space where transmission is suspected to have occurred in that setting,” according to Adam Masters, epidemiologist for the Knox County Health Department. “Since the students have been in close proximity to one another and are exhibiting the same symptoms, it’s likely they received the illness from the same source or one another,” said Masters.

Last Thursday, school officials notified Wiggin Street parents of the confirmed case. The notice listed the symptoms of pertussis and recommended the Tdap vaccine for those students who have not been immunized. Health department staff said several families were in Friday to receive the vaccine. The health department is closed today due to the Columbus Day holiday, but will be open the remainder of the week for anyone needing the vaccine. Appointments are recommended and can be made by calling 740-399-8008.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), pertussis or whooping cough which it is commonly called, spreads easily through the air when an ill person sneezes, coughs or sneezes. In its earliest stages, the illness often causes cold-like symptoms including a runny nose and mild cough.

Later symptoms of the illness can include a high fever, headache, body aches and pains, extreme exhaustion and violent coughing that may be followed by gasping for air - often producing the "whooping" sound from which the sickness draws its name.

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With the flu season just getting under way, Masters is concerned that since the symptoms are similar, some parents might think their child has the flu instead of pertussis.

“Children exhibiting these symptoms, particularly if they attend Wiggin Street Elementary, should see a doctor as soon as possible,” said Masters, “Like the flu, pertussis basically has to run its course, but antibiotics are available to cut the severity and stop the spread of the illness to others.” He said the student who has been confirmed with pertussis is taking antibiotics.

Pertussis can cause serious and sometimes deadly complications in babies and young children, especially those who have not received all recommended pertussis vaccines. Babies under a year old may develop pneumonia, have seizures, or suffer brain damage from pertussis. For teens and adults, the complications are usually less serious especially in those who have been vaccinated with a pertussis vaccine. The cough itself is the source of most complications in teens and adults, causing affected individuals to pass out or break (fracture) a rib during violent coughing fits.

The pertussis vaccine is administered as part of the required immunization schedule for children before they enter school. With age, protection from the vaccination wanes, leaving adolescents and adults vulnerable so there is a booster shot available to children, ages 11 through 18. The booster shot is strongly recommended also for parents of young children and those who take care of young children such as day care workers and grandparents.

For more information, contact Lorraine Bratton, RN, communicable disease nurse at the Knox County Health Department at 740-399-8003 or lbratton@knoxhealth.com.

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