Flu is not the only danger: Get a booster shot against whooping cough too

By ACSH Staff — January 16, 2013

While the flu epidemic rages, reminding us that this viral contagion is nothing to be messed with, an ongoing epidemic has taken a bit of a back seat. Pertussis, or whooping cough, struck the highest number of Americans in 2012 since the days of President Eisenhower.

Early preliminary government figures of 2012 cases show that almost 42,000 Americans were diagnosed with the bug that causes days (or weeks) of severe coughing, headache, and fever. The cough typically has a high-pitched rasping sound, hence the descriptive moniker. While severely unpleasant for anyone infected (and their spouses), newborns and infants are the most vulnerable to severe complications, and even fatalities. These babies are unable to receive the vaccine before their immature immune systems have developed somewhat: only after 2 months of age can an infant get the first of the series of five TDaP shots, providing needed protection against the invading bacterium.

It used to be a common threat, with hundreds of thousands of cases annually. Cases gradually dropped after a vaccine was introduced in the 1940s. but case counts started to climb again in the 1990s. There were more than 27,000 reported cases in 2010, the year California saw an especially bad epidemic. The number of whooping cough cases had remained constant at about 5,000 per year before the 1990s, but numbers have been climbing since then. This may be attributed to the fact that the vaccine used originally caused occasional serious reactions, and it was substantially changed about 20 years ago.

Unfortunately, the newer vaccine does not seem to provide as long-lasting protection as the old one. For this reason, health officials have recommended that certain groups especially pregnant women get another booster shot to strengthen the protection offered by the vaccine, originally administered to infants and children. They are contemplating such recommendations for teens and adults as well.

This measure seems necessary, because, sadly, the severely-affected newborns and infants are most often infected by their parents and other family members, who may not even know that they harbor the contagion. The older vaccine, while not well-tolerated in some, did provide many years of immunity. The protection conferred by the new vaccine seems to wane after ten to twenty years, accounting for the recurrent epidemics among older teens and young adults. These groups bring the bug into the homes of infants too young to have received the vaccine, and the consequences can be tragic.

As we look back on 2012, we are reminded once again of the importance of getting vaccinated, be it against the flu, whooping cough or a multitude of other illnesses which can be prevented. While
2012 was the worst year for pertussis (whooping cough) in six decades, according to Dr. Tom Clark of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there is the possibility of reaching even higher numbers in the coming years.

The winter of 2012-13 one of the worst for the flu in a decade. We may not be at the peak yet. CDC Director Dr. Thomas Frieden: It seems to be starting earlier than most flu seasons and the strain of flu that’s spreading tends to be associated with earlier and more severe flu years. Just another reason you may want to think about stopping by your doctor or your local pharmacy, if you have not already done so, to get your yearly flu vaccination [5]. Many such sites also have other vaccines available, including the TDaP against pertussis, diphtheria and tetanus.

That’s right: It is not too late to get your flu shot. There are plenty of doses available, but unpredictable demand may cause temporary shortages in some localities. Don’t give up!

*By ACSH’s Gilbert Ross, MD. Originally published Jan. 15, 2013 in Examiner.com [6].*