Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

September 20, 2012

To UW-River Falls Students, Faculty, and Staff,

As you probably are aware, there has been an increase in the number of confirmed cases of pertussis in the region, so we thought we would pass along the following information.

As always, if there are confirmed cases of pertussis in a UW-River Falls student, faculty, or staff, Pierce County Public Health Department (or the local public health department in the county of residence) and UW-River Falls Student Health Services will work to assure appropriate treatment and isolation/quarantine, and follow-up and treatment of all identified contacts.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, Division of Public Health, pertussis (whooping cough) is a contagious bacterial disease that affects the respiratory tract. While pertussis can infect persons of all ages, it is most serious in infants and young children.

Pertussis is spread by contact with respiratory, oral, or nasal secretions from an infected symptomatic person, such as an explosive cough or sneeze in the face, sharing food, sharing eating utensils during a meal, or kissing. Exposure usually occurs after repeated or prolonged indoor face-to-face contact, such as shared confined space, or in close proximity for a prolonged period of time, such as an hour or longer, with an infected symptomatic person. So for example, attending a class with an infected person would not generally constitute exposure.

Pertussis initially presents with cold-like symptoms and a cough that becomes much worse over a period of 1-2 weeks. Symptoms usually include a long series of coughs (“coughing fits”), but adults often do not develop the “whooping” characteristic of the cough. There is generally no fever. The cough is often worse at night and cough medicines usually do not help alleviate the cough. People with pertussis may have a series of coughs followed by vomiting, turning blue, or difficulty catching breath.

There have also been cases of parapertussis in the area. Parapertussis is a bacterial illness believed to be spread in the same manner and with signs and symptoms that are similar to pertussis, but typically milder and of shorter duration. At present, persons being tested for pertussis are also automatically being tested for parapertussis. While medication treatment can be the same for both, the guidelines for exposure/isolation/quarantine for parapertussis may differ (be less stringent) as compared to pertussis. Also of note, pertussis vaccine does not protect against parapertussis.

Persons who suspect they may be infected with pertussis (have symptoms of pertussis) (or parapertussis), or persons who have regular contact with small children (particularly infants) and think they may have been exposed, should contact their health care provider,
or call the River Falls Medical Clinic at 715/425-6701. There is a generic brand for the medication of choice, which is less costly, so those persons without health insurance coverage or who have to pay for the medication may want to request the generic brand. Office visits with general health care providers are covered for current UW-River Falls students at the River Falls Medical Clinic, but medications and pertussis/parapertussis testing are not covered.

If you are informed by a health care provider that you should stay on isolation (or quarantine), you should stay home and not go to class or work until you have been treated for the designated amount of time (usually 5 days) or your test comes back negative. For students living in the residence halls, isolation meals can be arranged for by going to http://www.uwrf.edu/Dining/MealPlans/IsolationMealBox.cfm or calling 715/425-4444 and asking for Dining Services.

For more information and additional resources and links, check out the Wisconsin Immunization Program web page on Pertussis (Whooping Cough), and Parapertussis, at http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/immunization/pertussis.htm#press

For questions or inquiries, please contact Pierce County Public Health Department at 715/273-6755 or UW-River Falls Student Health Services at 715/425-3293.

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