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Contact: Chris Minnick
Mobile: 575-649-0754

New Pilot Project to Help Protect Newborns from Whooping Cough

(Las Cruces) -- The New Mexico Department of Health and Christus St. Vincent Regional Medical Center in Santa Fe have launched a nine-month Pertussis cocooning pilot project to help protect newborns who are not yet vaccinated against the disease. The concept of cocooning is to protect babies not old enough for a pertussis vaccination by surrounding the infant with a “cocoon” of protected people.

Dr. Maggi Gallaher, medical director for the Department of Health’s Public Health Division, said post-partum mothers, new fathers and others who will care for the newborn will be immunized with the Pertussis vaccine booster shot called Tdap. Pertussis, otherwise known as “Whooping Cough,” is a serious bacterial respiratory infection that is highly contagious. Pertussis is preventable with immunization, however infants are not able to be immunized until two months of age and not fully immunized until they have completed their full series of DTaP vaccines by 15 to 18 months of age.

“Pertussis cases are on the rise in New Mexico and throughout many parts of the United States, so this project is an important step to control the spread of the disease,” Dr. Gallaher said. “The best thing parents can do to protect their children from diseases is to make sure all their immunizations are up to date. Immunizations are the best tool we have to protect children from serious and potentially life threatening diseases.”

So far this year there have been 141 cases of Pertussis reported to the Department of Health, which is an increase over the 94 cases in 2009, and 85 cases in 2008. Pertussis infection initially resembles a cold and can last for weeks to even months. Pertussis will not go away on its own and needs to be treated with antibiotics.

Infants and young children are the most vulnerable to Pertussis, especially those younger than four months of age. More than half of infants with Pertussis require hospitalization and some may die. Approximately 75 percent of infants who get Pertussis contract the disease from a family member. Seventh-grade students need a booster dose of Pertussis vaccine. The vaccine’s effect wears off over time, leaving adolescents and adults vulnerable to contracting Pertussis.

Dr. Gallaher said new or expectant parents statewide interested in the cocooning should ask their physicians about receiving a Tdap shot and can suggest that their immediate family and people who will be in direct contact with the baby do the same.

Vaccines are free for any child in New Mexico, regardless of insurance status, under the Vaccines for Children program. Most commercial insurances will cover necessary adult

immunizations. Adults are encouraged to contact their provider or pharmacy plan for more information on receiving the vaccine for Pertussis protection. Families with insurance should contact their provider for children's vaccine. Children who have no insurance coverage can get vaccine at their local public health office. Public health office contact information can be found in the blue pages of the phonebook or on online at www.nmhealth.org.

To control the spread of Pertussis, the Department of Health recommends the following:

- Vaccinate all children younger than 7 years of age with the complete series.
- Vaccinate adolescents 11 to 18 and adults 19 to 64 years of age with Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria and Pertussis).
- Anyone with a cough illness lasting two weeks or longer and/or anyone who has unexplained coughing spasms should be evaluated for Pertussis.
- Anyone diagnosed with Pertussis and their household and other close contacts should receive antibiotics to prevent further spread of the disease.
- Anyone starting antibiotics to treat Pertussis should stay home and avoid contact with all persons outside of the household for five days after starting appropriate antibiotics.

The pilot project started January 1, 2011. A second pilot project will be conducted in collaboration with Holy Cross Hospital in Taos early in 2011.

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