

Whooping cough epidemic declared in New Zealand, pregnant women urged to get immunised



Bacteria Bordetella pertussis, which causes whooping cough. Photo / 123rf

A whooping cough epidemic has been declared across the country, with health authorities urging pregnant women to get immunised as soon as possible.

The announcement comes after the latest reporting showed spikes of whooping cough cases in May, June, July and another steady increase since September.

A total of 263 cases have been reported in the last four weeks (between October 19 to November 15) – the highest number of cases over a four-week period, to date, this year.

Director of Public Health, Dr Nicholas Jones, said a number of countries are experiencing record levels of whooping cough – also known as Pertussis – possibly because of lower infection rates during Covid-19.

“Our main concern with this epidemic is the risk of severe illness among babies either too young to be immunised or whose immunisations are delayed.

“Our key objective is to protect pēpi through on-time vaccination and immunisation during pregnancy.”

Health officials are said to have been monitoring the situation closely over recent months and met yesterday to review the latest national and international trends in the disease.

Māori and Pasifika babies will be most affected



Health professionals are being urged to promote on-time vaccinations among vulnerable groups including Māori and Pasifika. Photo / Mike Scott, file

Most babies affected will be Maori and Pasifika children

Jones said New Zealand should be ready to see similarly high levels of cases over the next 12 months or more.

And as in previous epidemics, he said those babies most affected will be Māori and Pasifika children. As a result, healthcare professionals are being urged to remain vigilant and to continue to promote on-time vaccinations to protect vulnerable groups and communities.

“Even in countries with very high levels of immunisation, epidemics still occur every few years, but the numbers of babies who get very sick is much lower when mothers have been vaccinated during pregnancy and when pēpi are vaccinated on time.”

The last time there was a big outbreak of whooping cough was seven years ago.

Health NZ Te Whatu Ora says the National Public Health Service is “well prepared” to manage the epidemic; with a national response team now set up to co-ordinate and support activity across the public health services.

National clinical director / protection, Dr Susan Jack, said: “Our last major outbreak of Pertussis was in 2017. But they can last for months and potentially for a year or more.

“So this will be a marathon, not a sprint.”

Whooping cough hospitalisation

Around 50% of babies who catch whooping cough before they turn 1 need to be hospitalised. One or two in 100 children will die from the infection.

“Whooping cough is a highly contagious illness that can be particularly dangerous for newborn babies, and older adults, and in some cases it can be fatal.

“Sadly, three babies died from whooping cough last year, and we want to avoid that happening again,” she said.

“The best protection for infants is for their mother to be vaccinated during pregnancy. The antenatal vaccination for pertussis is safe and free.

“This is most effective when given from 16 weeks of pregnancy – and should be – done during each pregnancy to provide the best protection for each baby.”

www.nzherald.co.nz, November 22, 2024