With 1,407 reported cases as of Dec. 8, Colorado's pertussis epidemic has exceeded the number of cases seen in the state going back at least six decades. The last time Colorado experienced this level of pertussis, commonly referred to as whooping cough, was in 1948 with 1,833 cases.

There was one pertussis death in October of this year—an older adult in Larimer County. This is the first whooping cough death in the state since 2005, when there were two infant deaths. Whooping cough is typically most dangerous for babies and young children but can affect people of all ages.

"Usually at this time of year we focus on reminding residents to get their flu immunizations, but this year we need to couple that with a message for people also to protect themselves and their loved ones from whooping cough," said Dr. Rachel Herlihy, director of the Immunization Section at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. "Immunization is the best method of protection against both the flu and whopping cough."

It is recommended all adults and children receive the whooping cough booster vaccine, Tdap.

According to Herlihy, it's especially important for those who have contact with young children to talk to their doctors about their whooping cough immunization status, because young children are more vulnerable to the disease.

In young children, particularly infants, whooping cough can lead to difficulty breathing, hospitalization and even death. Child care workers, health care workers, parents, grandparents and siblings of young children all must make sure they are up to date on their whooping cough vaccinations. Immunity to pertussis wanes over time, so booster doses of the vaccine are necessary, even for people who have had the disease in the past.

Whooping cough cases are distributed throughout 31 Colorado counties, with most cases reported in Jefferson (242), Denver (207), Adams (195), Arapahoe (160) and Boulder (158). The case counts are from Jan. 1-Dec. 8, 2012.

Individuals with whooping cough should avoid contact with others until they have taken five full days of an appropriate antibiotic and are no longer contagious. This recommendation is especially important for children who are in school and could infect their classmates if they return too soon.

In addition, people in close contact with someone diagnosed with pertussis should receive a course of antibiotics to prevent becoming sick themselves, or infecting others, regardless of age or immunization history.

As a provision of the Affordable Care Act, people with insurance can get immunizations, including the whooping cough shot, at no cost at their doctor's office. For more information on the act and preventive care coverage, go to pricelessprevention.org .

People without insurance may be eligible to receive low-cost immunization at one of Colorado's local public health agencies.

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