Dr. Chris Urbina, chief medical officer and executive director of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, said Monday, Aug. 20, “We are alerting the public to an epidemic number of pertussis cases in Colorado and are urging Coloradans to get vaccinated against pertussis.”

From Jan. 1-Aug. 11, a total of 715 cases of pertussis have been reported in Colorado, compared to a 2007-2011 average of 158 cases during the same calendar period. Rates of pertussis are highest among infants under 6 months of age, followed by infants 6-11 months old and children 11-14 years.

Though the increase is widespread, the largest numbers of cases have been reported from Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver and Jefferson counties. There have been no reported deaths due to pertussis in 2012.

Urbina said, “Infants are particularly susceptible to severe disease due to pertussis and have much higher rates of hospitalizations and deaths due to pertussis. Infants are too young to have received all the doses necessary to protect against pertussis, so immunizing people who care for infants and who spend time around infants is key.”

The department is advising that vaccination is the safest and most effective tool to prevent the spread of pertussis. Pertussis immunizations are recommended for all children and adults, but it is particularly important for people who have contact with infants to be up to date on their immunizations.

Ideally, the vaccine should be received at least two weeks before beginning contact with an infant. Parents should ensure their children are up to date on their vaccines, including pertussis.

Additionally, the pertussis vaccine, Tdap, is recommended for the following groups:

—pregnant women in the third or late second trimester.

—parents of infants under 12 months of age.

—caregivers of infants, including grandparents, babysitters and child care workers.

—health care workers.

—others who plan on having close contact with an infant.

—all adults who need a tetanus booster, if they previously have not received Tdap.

Pertussis is a bacterial infection of the respiratory tract that can easily spread though the air in droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The illness often starts with cold-like symptoms, including sneezing, a runny nose and a mild cough. Often there is no fever or only a low-grade fever.

The cough becomes more severe during the first week or two and often is characterized by episodes of rapid coughs (coughing fits), followed by a high-pitched whoop or a coughing fit followed by vomiting. The cough may last for a couple of months and is more frequent at night.

Since symptoms experienced by adolescents or adults may be relatively mild, individuals may not realize they have pertussis; yet they still can spread the disease to others, including newborns and children who are not fully immunized.

Young infants with pertussis often do not have a cough but experience apnea (periods of no breathing) or gasping. The disease may be fatal in some cases, particularly in infants.

If one thinks they or their child has pertussis, contact a health care provider.

For more information on pertussis, go to http://www.cdphe.state.co.us/dc/Epidemiology/Pertussis/index.html .

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