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Officials confirm 12 cases of whooping cough in Hunterdon County

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By [Mike Frassinelli/The Star-Ledger](#)

A dozen cases of whooping cough have been found in children since the middle of last month in Hunterdon County, health officials said today.

"It is not unusual to have individual cases. It is unusual for us to have this number of cases in this defined time period," said John Beckley, the Hunterdon County health director. Dawn Thomas, a state Department of Health spokeswoman, said the department was aware of no other outbreaks in New Jersey. The state typically has a couple hundred cases a year, including 229 cases in 2007 and 301 in 2006, Thomas said.

In Hunterdon, nine cases of the contagious disease were found in students from the Clinton Public School, where the elementary school nurse required infected youngsters to receive five days of antibiotics before returning. One

After the first case was found, county health officials reported it to local pediatricians in an attempt to break the chain.

"It's a bit of detective work; it's like medical sleuthing," Beckley said, adding all of the affected children are doing fine.

All of the infected children had been vaccinated, but Hunterdon officials said the immunity to the vaccine can wane between ages 7 and 9 and that there is no licensed vaccine for children in that age group.

Whooping cough, known formally as pertussis, is a bacterial infection of the respiratory tract that is usually spread through the air by close, indoor repeated contact with an infected person. It typically is passed by talking, coughing or sneezing.

For the outbreak to be considered over, there has to be a 21-day gap since the last case, said Rose Puelle, director of public health for Hunterdon County. If the case in Franklin Township is confirmed, the clock would start anew.

Prior to vaccinations being available, pertussis was widespread in America.

Puelle encouraged adults to check their immunization status.

Pertussis starts with cold-like symptoms and a cough that gets gradually more severe over one to two weeks. Symptoms can include bursts of coughing followed by high-pitched "whoop" noises, vomiting or loss of breath.

Pneumonia is a possible complication, and up to 30 percent of people with pertussis require hospitalization, usually infants under six months.

Children should receive four doses of DTaP vaccine when they are between 2 months and 18 months old and an additional dose before starting school, the local health department said. The licensed Tdap pertussis booster for people ages 10 to 64, required for New Jersey school-aged children, might provide added protection, the



age 18 and boys get 66 during that time. "Our babies and our toddlers receive five pertussis shots until age 5, and that's not enough to protect them at age 7?" she said.

Habakus said pertussis exists in animal reservoirs and has always been cyclical, regardless of vaccination. "Every time they have a new shot, they say 'once and done.' It's insanity at this point," she said. "Are they saying that we need a pertussis shot every year?"

The local health department urges people in close contact with pertussis cases to also take antibiotics and consult a health care provider. Treatment includes two weeks of antibiotics.

People having coughs of a week or longer with explosive or sleep-disturbing coughing spasms are urged to contact their physicians for possible laboratory testing and treatment, the health department said.

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If the FDA provides emergency authorization and the government provides free COVID vaccinations, when would you plan on getting a COVID vaccine?

- As soon as it is available to me
- After it has been available for several months
- After it has been available for at least a year



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