Whooping cough can be deadly for infants, but 61 percent of adults don't know their vaccine status

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Cases of pertussis, also known as whooping cough, are on the rise in the U.S., recently reaching their highest level in 50 years. The disease can be serious or even fatal to newborns who have not yet received vaccinations.

Effective vaccines against pertussis have been available for many decades, but that vaccine protection can wear off over time. A new University of Michigan poll shows that 61 percent of adults say they don't know when they were last vaccinated against pertussis, which could mean they might be unwittingly exposing vulnerable babies to the disease.

Only 20 percent of adults reported that they received the pertussis vaccine less than 10 years ago (the recommended time frame) and 19 percent said they were vaccinated more than 10 years ago.

"Pertussis is a very preventable disease," says Matthew M. Davis, M.D., M.A.P.P., director of the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health.

"But many adults may think their childhood vaccinations still are protecting them against pertussis. Findings from this poll show that few adults have received a booster shot within the recommended 10-year time frame and in fact, two-thirds told us they were not aware of their

vaccination status."

Pertussis easily spreads within households, day care facilities, schools and neighborhoods and is most often serious in infants and young children. In fact, the majority of deaths from pertussis occur in children less than 3 months old.

The poll found, however, broad support for parents to insist their newborns aren't exposed to those who might not be current on their pertussis vaccine.

The majority of adults polled (72%) strongly agree or agree that parents have the right to insist that visitors receive the pertussis vaccine before visiting a newborn baby in the hospital. Nearly two-thirds (61%) of adults strongly agree or agree that parents should make sure all adults receive the pertussis vaccine before visiting a newborn baby at home.

Pertussis vaccines are recommended for teens and adults (known as the "Tdap" vaccine), including pregnant women. Boosting immunity against pertussis among teens and adults is especially important for protecting newborns against the disease. Most infants who fall sick with pertussis got the illness from an older child or adult with pertussis.

"Welcoming a baby to the family is a wonderful time, and no one would want to put an infant at risk. So the results of this poll are encouraging because they indicate some awareness that visitors need to be protected against this disease," Davis says.

"Teens and adults who have received the Tdap vaccine are less likely to get whooping cough themselves, and therefore less likely to spread whooping cough to other people—including infants who have not yet been protected by the recommended pertussis vaccinations."

Davis says he hopes the awareness among parents will increase the numbers of people seeking a booster vaccine.

"Expectant parents should have a conversation about pertussis vaccine with their family and close friends BEFORE the baby is born, to allow time for them to get their pertussis vaccine up to date," Davis says.

"If parents begin to take this approach, it may have a very positive impact decreasing the number of newborns who become severely ill or die as a result of pertussis."

  More information: Full report: mottnpch.org/reports-surveys/p … borns-whooping-cough

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