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NSW Health to provide free whooping cough vaccinations for pregnant women in their third trimester

NSW Health is now providing free vaccinations against pertussis (whooping cough) to pregnant women during their third trimester, after evidence showed it lessened the risk of infants catching the potentially fatal infection.

Illawarra Shoalhaven Director of Public Health, Curtis Gregory, said NSW Health will fund the new initiative during the current outbreak of whooping cough.

The change in advice is in line with a new recommendation released by The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

“We urge pregnant women to ensure they are vaccinated in their third trimester, ideally at 28-32 weeks, as it offers the best protection for babies until their first vaccination at six to eight weeks of age,” said Mr Gregory.

The NHMRC, which is responsible for endorsing the *Australian Immunisation Handbook*, updated its advice after a review of available evidence showed that immunising pregnant mothers in the third trimester significantly reduces the incidence of whooping cough in newborn babies, and therefore lessens the risk of infant death.

The updated advice is a result of work undertaken by the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) for the Australian Technical Advisory Group for Immunisation (ATAGI).

“Whooping cough vaccination during pregnancy has been studied in more than 37,000 women in the United States and the United Kingdom and is shown to be very safe,” he said.

“Studies in the UK, United States and Israel provide evidence that the best way to protect infants too young to be vaccinated themselves – who are at highest risk of morbidity and mortality – is through vaccinating the mother during pregnancy.

“It is vital that parents also ensure all their children are up to date with their vaccinations to minimise the risk of whooping cough circulating in the family. Adults in close contact with young babies should also discuss the benefits of the vaccine, which is available on prescription, with their GP.

“Whooping cough is easily spread to new babies, so it’s important to keep people with coughs away from them, in case they have whooping cough or other nasty infections,” said Mr Gregory.

Pertussis disease notifications in NSW have been increasing since mid-2014. There were 177 reported cases in January 2014, increasing to 501 in December 2014 – mainly across the 0-14 year age group.

“Epidemics of pertussis occur about every three to four years, as community immunity wears down. The last outbreak was in early 2012 and we are seeing the kinds of numbers that indicate we are experiencing another one,” he said.

Pertussis is a serious respiratory infection that causes a long coughing illness. In babies, the infection can sometimes lead to pneumonia and occasionally brain damage, and can be life threatening.

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