

# SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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## UT SOUTHWESTERN PEDIATRICIAN EMPHASIZES IMPORTANCE OF VACCINATIONS AS WHOOPING COUGH CASES RISE

DALLAS — March 18, 1999 — National health officials are reporting an increasing incidence of whooping cough — a disease that presents a major risk to infants because of their underdeveloped immune systems — prompting doctors to re-emphasize the importance of vaccinations.

UT Southwestern pediatricians recognize approximately 25 cases in hospitalized infants each year at Children's Medical Center at Dallas. But the number of cases has remained steady for the past three years, so far bucking the national trend, said Dr. Janet Squires, an associate professor of pediatrics at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and an expert in pediatric infectious diseases.

She pointed out that while adults tend not to become seriously ill with the infection, they can spread the disease to more vulnerable children.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention researchers in Atlanta say that 7,796 cases of pertussis were reported in 1996. While this is much lower than the approximately 250,000 cases reported annually during the epidemic years of the 1940s, health demographers have noted a gradual rise in cases from 1980 through the 1990s.

Prior to the 1950s, many people experienced a natural immunity to pertussis, or whooping cough. Passive immunity was often passed from mother to infant, giving newborns some protection before their first immunization at age 2 months.

Since a whooping cough vaccine was developed, "women of child-bearing age now have lower levels of anti-pertussis antibodies to pass on to infants," said Squires, director of general pediatric services at Children's. "But the real problem lies with those parents who do not provide the recommended vaccines to their infants. Some parents are influenced by snippets of information reinforcing long-standing controversies about the safety of the vaccine, and most parents today do not realize that they are at risk of pertussis."

(MORE)

## VACCINE # 2

According to the National Network for Child Care, immunization is particularly important for youngsters in child care, as preschool-aged children have the highest incidence of measles, pertussis, rubella and Haemophilus influenza type b (Hib).

Most pediatricians recommend that parents follow the pertussis immunization schedule. Infants should receive their first shot at 2 months, a booster at age 4 months, a second booster at 6 months, then at 12 to 15 months and, finally, between ages 4 to 7.

"As with the original pertussis vaccine, the newer acellular vaccine is still only recommended up to the seventh birthday," Squires said. "Adults can serve as the reservoir for disease for infants, but vaccine efforts are not recommended for adults."

Adults who have a chronic recurrent cough might misinterpret the symptoms as allergies or viral illness, Squires said. Such adults should see a physician, especially if young infants are in the home, and pertussis can then be investigated with proper cultures.

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