



ARMSTRONG JUNIOR SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL
300 BUFFINGTON DRIVE
KITTANNING, PENNSYLVANIA 16201

Office of the
Jr.-Sr. High School Principal

5/25/17

Telephone
(724) 548-7600

May 25, 2017

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Today the Armstrong Junior/Senior High School received notice that one of our students has been diagnosed with whooping cough (pertussis), and that we are mandated by the Pennsylvania Department of Health to send a notice of such to all of our students and their families. The irony of the mandate is that this student has already been treated for pertussis and is no longer infectious (privacy and confidentiality laws restrict sharing personal student information). Adding to the irony is that pertussis cases in our county have been diagnosed throughout the year (every year), and that we who live in the community more than likely have already had exposure.

A few years ago while facing a similar mandate to report a case of pertussis, we issued a letter that puts the pertussis risk in its proper, clinical perspective. Below is that letter, offered now to allay fears and to put this most recent case in its proper perspective—

This year as with past years, there are cases of whooping cough (pertussis) that have been diagnosed within our community and our schools. Until recently, there was little protection against whooping cough that could be offered to our older children and adults. The purpose of this communication is to inform you about protection against whooping cough and to educate our families about the signs, symptoms, and risks associated with this relatively common respiratory illness.

Whooping cough is caused by respiratory bacteria that are spread through the air whenever an infected person sneezes or coughs. The illness produces severe cold symptoms for two weeks and then progresses to symptoms characterized by violent coughing fits and a chronic cough that can last for weeks to months. Because the cold symptoms associated with pertussis are indistinguishable from the common cold, most cases are not diagnosed until the coughing phase of the illness begins. The population that is at highest risk for complications from pertussis are babies. For the most part, school age children, adolescents, and adults can be bothered by a prolonged and nagging cough but rarely suffer serious complications. Once diagnosed, antibiotics help to shorten the course of the illness and minimize its spread to others.

Prevention is the key to controlling whooping cough. Most parents remember the old DTP shots that children received during their first year and then boosters at 18 months and before school. These immunizations are generally protective for pertussis until age 11. However, we now have a safe vaccine (Tdap) to protect adolescents and adults against pertussis as well.

Tdap is recommended for use in most school students, ages 11 and older, and for any adults who routinely are involved with the healthcare of children. Accordingly, all families with children aged 11 or older, and all

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healthcare workers in our schools, doctor's offices, and hospitals are urged to contact their physicians to ask about the appropriateness of Tdap for their respective needs.

Attached to this communication is a modified fact sheet on whooping cough. If you suspect that your child or another family member has symptoms suggestive of whooping cough, please contact your physician, your school nurse or the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

Sincerely yours,

*Hal Altman, MD
Medical Consultant of the Armstrong School District*



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Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

Pertussis is a contagious disease that is spread through the air when an infected person sneezes or coughs. Pertussis begins with cold symptoms and a cough which becomes much worse over 1-2 weeks. Symptoms in the young usually include a long series of coughs (coughing fits reminiscent of a machine gun) followed by a “whoop”. However, older children and adults may not develop the characteristic and diagnostic whoop. Patients with pertussis may have a series of coughs followed by vomiting, turning blue or may have difficulty catching their breath. The cough is often worse at night and cough medicines are rarely effective. The disease can be severe in infants less than one year of age.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health strongly recommends the following:

- **If your child has had close contact with a person who has been diagnosed with whooping cough, promptly contact your child’s doctor.** Explain to the doctor that your child has been exposed to a case of pertussis and ask for advice. Your child’s doctor may do testing to make a diagnosis. If the doctor suspects pertussis, he/she may give an antibiotic that should help your child to get well faster and to lower the chance of spreading the illness to others. Your child will be able to return to school after completing five days of the medication.
- **If your child is diagnosed with pertussis,** all household members and other close contacts should be treated with antibiotics. Your physician will counsel you on this need.
- **Making sure that children receive all their shots on time is the best way to control pertussis.** The traditional pertussis vaccine is given to children under 7 years of age. If you are not sure that your child has been properly immunized, contact his/her doctor.
- **A new combination of tetanus, diphtheria, and acellular pertussis vaccine (Tdap)** is recommended for use in all 11-12 year olds and older. In adults less than 65 years of age, Tdap should be given as a one time dose in place of a tetanus (Td) booster. Currently there is no approved immunization for persons 65 years and older.

If you or your doctor has a question about pertussis, please call the Pennsylvania Department of Health at 1-877-PA-HEALTH or locally at 1-724-543-2700.

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Dear: Parent/Guardian

It has come to our attention that you/your child may have been exposed to a person who has pertussis (whooping cough).

Pertussis is a highly contagious disease that is spread through the air when an infected person sneezes or coughs. Pertussis begins with cold symptoms and a cough which becomes much worse over 1-2 weeks. Symptoms usually include a long series of coughs ("coughing fits") followed by a whooping noise. However, older children, adults and very young infants may not develop the whoop. People with pertussis may have a series of coughs followed by vomiting, turning blue, or difficulty catching their breath. The cough is often worse at night and cough medicines usually do not help alleviate the cough. The disease can be very severe and, although deaths are rare, they do occur especially in infants less than one year of age. Please refer to the enclosed fact sheet for more information on pertussis.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health strongly recommends the following:

- If you/your child is coughing, promptly contact your/your child's doctor. Explain to the doctor you/your child has been exposed to a case of pertussis and needs to be evaluated. Your child's doctor may obtain a nasopharyngeal culture to test for pertussis. In addition, if the doctor suspects pertussis, an antibiotic will be given to your child to help lower the chance of spreading the disease to others. Your child will be able to return to school after completing the first 5 days of the medication. It is very important that upon returning to school your child continues taking his or her medication until completed.
- If you/your child are/is diagnosed with pertussis, all household members and other close contacts should also be treated with antibiotics regardless of their age or vaccination status.
- Making sure that children receive all their shots on time is the best way to control pertussis in the future. In children, diphtheria, tetanus and acellular pertussis vaccine (DTaP) is only given to those under age 7 years of age. Children should receive one dose of DTaP vaccine at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, and between 15-18 months of age. In addition, one dose is needed before starting school (on or after the 4th birthday). Check with your pediatrician to see if your child is eligible for another dose of DTaP in the accelerated schedule. If you are not sure your child is properly immunized, promptly contact his or her doctor.
- The combination tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccine (Tdap) is recommended for children ages 7 through 10 (if not fully vaccinated) and adolescents and adults as a one-time dose. It is also recommended during EACH pregnancy to protect the newborn infant.
- Anyone eligible for Tdap may receive it regardless of interval since the most recent tetanus containing vaccine.

If you or your doctor has a question about pertussis, please call the Pennsylvania Department of Health at 1-877-PA-HEALTH.

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