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Health Officials Confirm 2 Whooping Cough Deaths in Young Infants, Urge Recommended Immunizations

FRANKFORT, Ky. (June 6, 2025) – Today, state health officials with the Kentucky Department for Public Health (KDPH) announced that two infants have died from pertussis (whooping cough) in the commonwealth in the last six months. Neither the infants nor their mothers had received the recommended immunizations against pertussis during pregnancy or infancy. These are the first pertussis-related deaths in Kentucky since 2018. Health officials urge all Kentuckians to remain up to date on recommended pertussis immunizations and emphasize the importance of maternal immunization during pregnancy and for all infants beginning promptly at 2 months of age.

“Anyone can get whooping cough, but infants are at greatest risk for life-threatening illness,” said KDPH Commissioner Dr. Steven Stack. “Fortunately, when vaccinations are administered to pregnant women, it provides protection to both the mother and the baby.”

Whooping cough is a very contagious respiratory illness. Symptoms of whooping cough can vary for people based on their age and vaccination status but typically begin with a runny or congested nose and mild coughing. After 1-2 weeks, the cough can progress to rapid, violent coughing fits that can cause the “whooping” sound, vomiting and labored breathing. Babies younger than 1 year old are at greatest risk for developing severe complications from whooping cough. Young infants may not initially present with classic symptoms of pertussis and may not even have a cough—instead they may just struggle to breath or stop breathing. People with pre-existing health conditions that may be worsened by whooping cough are at high risk for developing a severe infection.

Health officials [announced](#) in July 2024 that whooping cough cases had begun increasing in Kentucky to levels not seen in over a decade. There were 543 cases of whooping cough reported in Kentucky in 2024, the highest number of cases in the commonwealth since 2012. Already, 247 cases of whooping cough have been reported in Kentucky this year. Health officials

anticipate that whooping cough will continue to increase during the summer and fall, based on historic trends. Many U.S. states and other countries are also experiencing elevated levels of whooping cough.

Whooping cough spreads easily from person to person through the air. People can spread the bacteria from the start of symptoms and for at least two weeks after coughing begins. Some people have mild symptoms and don't know they have whooping cough, but they can still spread the bacteria to others. Many babies who get whooping cough are infected by older siblings, parents or caregivers who may not know they have it.

If you have been exposed to anyone with whooping cough or if you are having any whooping cough symptoms, go to your nearest clinic.

The pertussis immunization is combined with the tetanus and diphtheria vaccines (DTaP and Tdap) and is required for Kentucky school children. Data from the [2045-2025 Kentucky school immunization survey](#) indicate that only 86% of kindergarteners and 85% of seventh graders are up to date on their required pertussis immunizations. Health officials encourage that everyone remain up to date with pertussis immunizations. This includes:

- All pregnant women should be immunized with every pregnancy to protect their babies.
- Infants should be immunized when they are 2 months, 4 months, 6 months and 12 to 15 months old.
- Children should be immunized before starting kindergarten.
- Teens should be immunized when 11 to 12 years old.
- Teens and adults should be immunized at least every 10 years or sooner if an injury occurs, or to protect a newborn.

Health care providers are encouraged to consider pertussis in children with respiratory infections and adults with persistent or violent coughs, particularly when treating patients from under-vaccinated, close-knit communities that are known to be particularly vulnerable to pertussis cases and outbreaks. Early detection, with [proper testing](#), is critical to prevent further spread.

For more information, please visit the [KDPH pertussis website](#) or contact your local health department.

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