

## Whooping cough spurs health consciousness

By PAMELA STAIK STAFF WRITER

If you don't regularly wash your hands with warm water and soap, now would be a good time to start, explained health officials in Charlotte, Sarasota and DeSoto counties.

That's because it's the most basic defense against pertussis, a highly contagious but vaccinepreventable bacterial infection also known as the whooping cough.

Beginning with coldlike symptoms, pertussis is noted by a long-lasting cough that becomes progressively worse. Some cases involve a long series of coughs, or coughing fits, followed by vomiting, turning blue or a whooping noise.

Although the DeSoto County Health Department hasn't reported any known cases of the illness since at least June 2006, several cases of pertussis have popped up in Sarasota and Charlotte counties recently.

Since January, a total of 21 cases have been reported to the Sarasota County Health Department, reported Epidemiologist Scott Pritchard.

He said 19 of these individuals are involved in a recent pertussis outbreak, all of which have connections to a private elementary school in North County.

Pritchard said the outbreak includes 14 children, who have an average age of 10, as well as five adults that include teachers and parents.

Believed to be connected to this group is a 4-month-old baby who was diagnosed with pertussis two months ago by Murdock-based pediatrician Dr. Ben Helgemo.

"It seems we've had a couple of cases every two to three months," Helgemo said. "There's a lot of kids who lose their immunity as they get older, and there are people out there who haven't been immunized."

These people can easily infect young children and infants, he said.

"Shots aren't 100 percent, and people need to understand that whooping cough is still out there," Helgemo said.

In addition to the diagnosis of a 5-year-old boy in Charlotte County on Monday, three cases were confirmed in the county about six months ago, said Lillian Gomes, the nursing program specialist with the Charlotte County Health Department.

To keep your chances of contraction down, she said there are a few things everyone should be doing.

For starters, she said everyone needs to get vaccinated.

"I can't emphasize enough that this is a vaccine-preventable illness," Gomes said. "It used to be that we would never see pertussis cases, and I think nationwide we're seeing a greater occurrence of it now."

In Florida, pertussis vaccinations are required at several stages of life, ranging from infants to middle-school-aged students.

Gomes added that because the immunity with the vaccines can weaken with age, adults should consider a booster whenever they get their 10-year tetanus shot. This can be accomplished with the DTaP vaccination, which takes care of diphtheria, tetanus and acellular pertussis.

Aside from keeping up with shots, Gomes suggests covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze, as well as washing your hands as often as possible.

"Nothing beats a good old hand washing with warm water," she said. "Sing happy birthday a few times to yourself as you lather up."

For more information about pertussis, visit [www.vaccineinformation.org/video/pertussis.asp](http://www.vaccineinformation.org/video/pertussis.asp).

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### PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Take these simple steps to prevent spreading germs or getting sick:

- Cover your cough/sneeze with a tissue or sleeve.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
- Stay home or keep your children home when they are sick.
- Keep immunizations up to date.

For information about whooping cough or pertussis, visit [www.vaccineinformation.org/video/pertussis.asp](http://www.vaccineinformation.org/video/pertussis.asp). If you think you or someone you know has pertussis, contact your local health care provider or your county's health department:

- Charlotte County, 941-833-3050 or [www.doh.state.fl.us/chdCharlotte](http://www.doh.state.fl.us/chdCharlotte)
- DeSoto County, 863-993-4601 or [www.doh.state.fl.us/chdDeSot](http://www.doh.state.fl.us/chdDeSot)
- Sarasota County, 941-861-2900 or [www.sarasotahealth.org](http://www.sarasotahealth.org)