

## OUR VIEW

### Take a shot: Immunizing kids, adults

**OUR POSITION:** Whooping cough cases highlight need for immunization of children and booster shots for adults.

An outbreak of pertussis, or whooping cough, in Sarasota County and isolated cases in Charlotte County in recent months provide a good opportunity to highlight the importance of vaccinating our children against preventable infectious diseases and for adults to protect themselves against these illnesses by getting recommended booster shots.

“The main thing that parents can do is to get their kids immunized,” recommended Lillian Gomes, the nursing program specialist for the Charlotte County Health Department. “Adults who work with small children, there is a vaccination with a booster component (for pertussis). As people get older their immunity wanes. They can get the pertussis and give it to the younger children.”

Nineteen people, including 14 children fell ill in a pertussis outbreak at a private school in northern Sarasota County. When a 5-year-old boy in Charlotte County was diagnosed with pertussis on Monday, the Health Department made inquiries about its possible connection with the Sarasota cases. It could not be determined if or how they were related and no new cases have been reported where the boy attends preschool in Port Charlotte. Many pediatricians are testing for the bacteria when patients come in with pertussis symptoms such as prolonged coughs, fevers, congestion and vomiting.

Scott Pritchard, an epidemiologist for the Sarasota County Health Department, said residents with such symptoms should seek medical care rather than using over-the-counter medications to alleviate them. He echoed Gomes’ call for adults to get booster shots. Gomes said booster shot given to teens 25-30 years ago did not include a pertussis component, which means that the parent of school-age children today are susceptible to contracting the illness even though they may have been vaccinated as a young child.

Contracting pertussis can be a pricey ordeal. Severe cases may require hospitalization and while some antibiotics are available free or at low cost at area supermarkets and pharmacies, others can run more than \$100. Because physicians often prescribe so-called prophylactic antibiotics for family members at risk for catching the illness from a stricken family member, that price can multiply quickly.

Help is available at the health departments, which offer price breaks for qualifying patients, based on income and ability to pay. And immunizations are free for children under 18 years of age. Adult booster shots are available through the health department or your primary physician. Costs depend on what is included in the booster. The most common booster shot given is called a TDaP, which also protects against tetanus and diphtheria. Physicians recommend such booster shots every 10 years for adults, a recommendation that often goes unheeded.

While whooping cough is no longer the dreaded killer it was before widespread vaccination began in the 1940s, the pertussis outbreak serves as a reminder that complacency leads to unpreparedness. For preventable diseases such as whooping cough, there’s no need for you or your children to fall ill for even a day.