

Call for a Whooping Cough Booster Shot for Adults

In reading your site, I thought you may be interested in my story. I am very concerned over the increasing dangers of adults passing on the whooping cough virus to infants and young children due to both the lack of public awareness and an adult booster shot.

My own recent experience as a confirmed adult case of severe whooping cough has left me compelled to be a voice to push for whatever research or funding needs to be done to convince the health authorities to have an adult booster shot available to the general public. I am aware that an acellular vaccine has been available to health care workers since 1996 with excellent results and few side effects reported.

As you know, most adults do not experience severe symptoms when they catch the virus and usually only have an annoying cough that may persist. This lack of notable symptoms is dangerous in the fact that that person may unwittingly pass the disease on to an infant or young child whose immunity is vulnerable. People need to know that just because their symptoms may be mild, it can have devastating results for a baby or youngster. We need to be more persistent with our doctors and ask to be tested when we have an unexplained cough that lasts more than three weeks. On the other side of the coin, physicians need to remember whooping cough is on the increase again and insist on testing more people.

In my case, I did have a severe case with the classical whoop and breathlessness at the end of spasmodic coughing. Before I was diagnosed (actually self-diagnosed), I suspected the breathlessness was my occasional asthma worsening with a cold virus but the emergency room doctor said it was not asthma - probably bronchitis or sinus infection. A swab was not suggested and I was put on a penicillin antibiotic. When the symptoms persisted and worsened I sat myself in front of our computer in complete frustration but determination to find an answer, so I typed in 'cough, can't catch breath' and all these whooping cough websites came up. One had an audio sample of an adult male with whooping cough, which sounded exactly like my own. To shorten the story, I made another emergency room visit on another Saturday expressing my suspicion so I could be tested. Unfortunately the hospital ran out of swabs, so myself and my husband (who at this point we suspected had a less severe case with some breathlessness after coughing) could not be tested. The concerned emergency doctor was quite certain we had the disease so he recommended a five day course of Zithromax for both of us and to avoid contact with the public for that period. I was able to stay at home, but my husband was not. The following Monday I took our 16 year old son and 12 year old daughter (who we suspect had it, but without the whoop) to the doctor to get them on the antibiotic as well. Two weeks after I finished the antibiotics, I visited the same doctor again and he recommended me getting a nasal swab even though the virus may not show, which I did. Today I got a phone call from the Swift Current public health nurse to tell me my swab tested positive.

The reason I am so passionate about this is because this disease literally knocked me off my feet for two months, forcing me to stop my active lifestyle and caused me great anxiety and stress trying to figure out what was wrong with me because no one suspected whooping cough. I also suffered from bruised ribs and torn stomach muscles for weeks due the violent and frequent episodes of coughing. When I experienced the nighttime bouts of breathlessness which would jolt my out of my

sleep, I can't begin to describe the feeling of panic and helplessness. It got to the point where I literally had to tell myself to take a breath in between coughs. More importantly, the main reason I'm so concerned is that I am very relieved that I did not infect my six month old little infant niece who was visiting while myself and my husband were starting the paroxysmal stage. I have the utmost empathy for little babies who contract this disease because I know what a severe case is like. Little infants who are helpless must experience sheer terror when they go through the paroxysms of coughing and I can most definitely see how some cases are fatal. Can you imagine how horrible a parent or grandparent would feel if they knew they infected their child or grandchild?

If the public is educated about the severity of this disease and how easily it is spread, I'm confident most people would want to receive the immunization. Personally, I was unaware that my immunity to the vaccine wore off most likely by the time I reached adulthood - Do many people know that? This is why we need to get the booster shot available as soon as possible.

Sincerely,
Brenda J. Walchuck
Swift Current, Saskatchewan
September 2003