

If 90% of children are vaccinated by the time they reach 12 months, then why is there an outbreak of whooping cough? Is it possible that the vaccine doesn't work?

Whooping cough jump sparks child health alert

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TASMANIA is in the grip of the worst outbreak of whooping cough for at least a decade.

The Public and Environmental Health Service has been notified of 146 cases of the disease, which is potentially fatal, particularly for babies and young children.

Parents who have not had their children immunised have been advised to act immediately.

The outbreak, concentrated in the South of the state, represents more than double the number of cases for the whole of last year (56).

Director of Public Health Mark Jacobs said: "Most of the cases have occurred in July and August. The August notifications exceeded the total for last year."

There have been 122 reported cases in the South, 16 in the North and eight in the North-West.

Dr Jacobs said at this stage there had been no cases of babies contracting the disease and no children admitted to paediatric wards.

He said antibiotic treatment, particularly in the early stages, may prevent or lessen the severity of symptoms.

"But once they develop the classic symptoms it is too late," Dr Jacobs said.

"Hospitalisation is usual for children under two.

"In severe cases infants may simply stop breathing."

Whooping cough is spread by direct contact with infected droplets produced by coughing and sneezing bouts.

The disease is characterised by severe coughing, which may be followed by vomiting or a sudden gasping inhalation, or "whoop".

Coughing may continue for up to three months.

Dr Jacobs said people who were experiencing sustained periods of coughing should consult a doctor.

A simple blood test has replaced the formerly uncomfortable diagnosis procedure of taking a swab through the nose to the back of the throat.

"A person with whooping cough should be excluded from child care, school or work until five days after starting antibiotic treatment or, if not treated, for three weeks from the start of the disease," Dr Jacobs said.

He said the absence of cases in babies this year showed immunisation efforts over the past few years had been successful.

"Our most recent figures show that about 90% of children are immunised by the time they reach their first birthday," Dr Jacobs said.

He said children should be immunised for the first time at two months of age and again at four months, six months, 18 months and then between the ages of four and five years.