Population Health
Waikato District Health Board

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To all schools, early child care services and Kohanga reo

**Re: Whooping cough and Other Winter illnesses including: Gastroenteritis, Influenza-like illnesses, Sore throats - *Group A Streptococcal* infection, Meningococcal disease**

## Pertussis

New Zealand and Waikato are continuing to experience an increase in Whooping cough (pertussis) cases.

Whooping cough can be really bad in infants and young children and can be very dangerous in young babies. Keeping cases away from school may be required to prevent ongoing spread.

Symptoms

Whooping cough is not always easy to recognise, and symptoms can vary according to the age of the person affected. Usually in the early stages symptoms can be similar to a common cold and include a runny nose, sneezing, low-grade fever, and a mild cough.
The most common symptom is continuous, rapid coughing often with a high pitched whoop sound. However, the whoop sound is not often seen in infants or adults. Young babies often do not have the "whoop", but may stop breathing during coughing. The cough may last for up to three months.

Prevention

Immunisation is the best protection against whooping cough. We recommend that children's immunisation should be up to date. Just a reminder, it is recommended that all children should receive their pertussis booster at 4 years old through their GP and 11 years via school programme.

Children and staff with symptoms of whooping cough should be encouraged to visit their doctor and may require antibiotics. Antibiotics are used to prevent the spread of the disease, but do not stop the coughing unless given when symptoms first start.

Keeping staff and children at home is important for the prevention of the spread of whooping cough. Those staff and children diagnosed with whooping cough should stay away from school and early child care services for the first five days of the course of antibiotics, or for three weeks from the start of the symptoms if antibiotics are not used. No exclusion is required if it has been longer than three weeks since the onset of symptoms, as they can no longer spread the disease (not infectious).

## Winter illnesses

Winter is the season for many cold and flu-like illnesses, stomach bugs (gastroenteritis), in particular Norovirus.

All these illnesses are spread in similar ways and the prevention messages are the same

- Wash your hands
- Cover your mouth when you cough (cough and sneeze etiquette)
- Carry out regular cleaning of all surfaces.

## Stomach bugs (Gastro-intestinal illnesses)

Winter sees a large number of stomach bugs; especially those caused by viruses.

Symptoms

Symptoms include sore tummies, nausea (feeling sick), vomiting and diarrhoea.

Prevention

Children should be kept from school and early childhood services if they have vomiting and/or diarrhoea and should not return until they are well and have had at least 24 hours of no diarrhoea and/or vomiting. These bugs are spread via hands to mouths.
They can remain on surfaces such as door handles and thus regular cleaning is encouraged. Please encourage hand washing before preparing food, eating meals and after visiting the toilet.

If the school/early childhood service has two or more cases associated with a specific room or year group, they are encouraged to discuss this with Population Health, who has guidelines available to assist

with the management of outbreaks of gastro-intestinal illnesses, and to prevent further illness within the school community.

## Influenza-like illness

Winter is the time for coughs, colds and influenza like illnesses.

Symptoms

Symptoms may include fever, aches and pains, coughs, sore throats, and headaches.

Prevention

Most of these are caused by viruses or bacteria which are spread via droplets by someone coughing and sneezing into their hand not washing it and passing it to someone else's hand or a surface which then becomes contaminated. Those individuals who now have the virus on their hands can easily rub their eyes or put their hand in their mouths, without thinking, and thus transfer the virus to themselves. Therefore regular cleaning in schools/early childhood services is encouraged at this time. It is also recommended that children practice good cough and sneeze etiquette and hand hygiene.

## Sore throats

Sore throats can be caused by a number of bacteria or viruses. When a sore throat is caused by *Group A Streptococcal* bacteria, if untreated, it can cause Rheumatic Fever – a serious disease that attacks the heart. All sore throats need to be seen by a doctor or nurse, and particularly if the child is in a high risk group for rheumatic fever, swabbed. If the swab comes back positive for Group A Strep, the child needs to be treated with a ten day course of antibiotics. If this is done, Rheumatic Fever can be prevented.

Prevention

Group A Strep is spread by droplets from someone coughing and sneezing. Good hand hygiene and covering ones mouth when coughing and sneezing is important to prevent the spread of Group A Strep. **Sore throats matter – get them checked!**

## Meningococcal disease

Meningitis and septicaemia (blood poisoning) are not always easy to recognise, and symptoms can appear in any order. Some may not appear at all. In the early stages, the signs and symptoms can be similar to many other more common illnesses, for example flu.
***Trust your instincts. If you suspect meningitis or blood poisoning, get medical help immediately.***

Symptoms

Early symptoms can include fever, headache, photophobia (not able to look at light), nausea (feeling sick), vomiting (being sick), a rash and muscle pain, with cold hands and feet.

A rash that does not fade when pressed can be a sign of meningococcal blood poisoning. This rash may begin as a few small spots anywhere on the body and can spread quickly to look like fresh bruises. The spots or rash are caused by blood leaking into the tissues under the skin. They are more difficult to see on darker skin, so look on paler areas of the skin and inside the lower eyelid. The rash may fade at first, so keep checking. If someone is ill or is obviously getting worse, do not wait for spots or a rash to appear. They may appear late or may not appear at all

Prevention

If your child is unwell and you are in doubt please seek medical advice.

If you require any further information regarding the above, please either contact your Public Health Nurse or Population Health.

Thank you for your time.

Kind regards,

Dr Anita Bell
Medical Officer of Health
Population Health, Waikato DHB