

California confirms first whooping cough death since 2010

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The California Department of Health announced on February 7 that a case of whooping cough, also known as pertussis, recently killed an infant under the age of six months in Riverside County.

The death was California's first confirmed pertussis fatality since 2010. That year, California experienced more than 9,100 cases, including 10 deaths. The CDPH said pertussis is a cyclical disease with peaks in incidence every three to five years.

"This baby's death is a tragedy for the family, and for California as a community, and this is a preventable disease," Ron Chapman, the state health officer and director of the CDPH, said. "Preventing deaths in infants by ensuring that all pregnant women get vaccinated is our primary goal in pertussis control. When pregnant women are vaccinated, the immunity they develop against pertussis is passed to their infants and helps protect infants until they are old enough to be vaccinated themselves. Young infants are at the greatest risk of severe or fatal pertussis."

Cases of pertussis in California declined steadily from the 2010 peak, though monthly case reports started to increase again in mid-2013. Of the cases reported in 2013, 83 percent of reported cases occurred in children under the age of 18. Of the pediatric cases, 12 percent occurred in infants younger than six months of age.

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"This serves as a sad reminder that illnesses like whooping cough are still very much with us, and immunizations are the first line of defense," Cameron Kaiser, the public health officer for Riverside County Department of Public Health, said. "We strongly encourage pregnant women to get vaccinated, all parents to vaccinate their children on time, and for adults to keep current with their booster shots to reduce the spread of the disease."

The CDPH said that booster shots for pertussis are important because neither the disease nor the vaccine confer lifelong immunity.