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# News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Recent Outbreaks Prompt an Immunization Alert**

(March 29, 2001) – Due to an outbreak of whooping cough (pertussis) in the neighboring state of Arizona, and a Clark County elementary school that is experiencing a large number of cases of chicken pox (varicella), the Clark County Health District is issuing a reminder on the importance of immunizations.

Whooping cough and chicken pox are highly contagious diseases that can have serious complications. Both are vaccine-preventable diseases. Currently Arizona has documented over 300 cases of whooping cough. While no cases have been reported in Clark County the proximity merits stepped up surveillance for local cases of the disease. Currently, chicken pox is not reportable, however 18 cases have been documented in a local school.

“Vaccines have had a tremendous impact on the health of the public during the last century and I cannot emphasize the importance of proper immunizations enough,” said Dr. Donald Kwalick, chief health officer for the Health District. “There is a misconception that these diseases are a routine part of childhood. The reality is that they can lead to more serious conditions and even result in deaths.”

The Health District is supporting a change to state regulations that would add chicken pox, hepatitis A and hepatitis B to the list of required immunizations. For more information regarding the Health District’s Immunization Clinics call 383-1351.

(more)

### **Facts about Pertussis (Whooping Cough)**

- Pertussis is a contagious, bacterial respiratory disease. Although pertussis may be a mild disease in older children and adults, in younger children this disease can be complicated by pneumonia and occasionally inflammation of the brain. In rare cases pertussis can cause death (especially in children less than one year of age).
- The first stage usually begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, low-grade fever and cough. The cough lasts one to two weeks and then becomes worse.
- The second stage includes uncontrolled coughing spells followed by a whooping noise when a person breathes in. During these severe coughing spells, a person may vomit, or their lips or face may look blue from a lack of oxygen. Between coughing spells, a person may appear well. This stage may last four to six weeks.
- Very young infants (less than six months of age), adolescents and adults may not have these symptoms. Pertussis in these groups may seem more like a cold with a cough that may last a long time.
- Unimmunized children less than one year of age are at greatest risk of serious complications from pertussis infections. Eighty percent of deaths due to pertussis are among children in this age group. Of these, 70% are under six months of age.
- After vaccination, immunity wanes over time, and infected (untreated) adolescents and adults can become infected and serve as a reservoir for infection of infants.
- The bacteria which cause pertussis are found in the mouths, noses, and throats of infected people and are spread in the air by droplets produced during sneezing or coughing.

### **Facts About Chicken Pox**

- Chickenpox is caused by varicella-zoster virus (VZV) and is usually mild, but it may be severe in infants, adults, and persons with impaired immune systems.
- Adults are more likely to have a more serious case of chickenpox with a higher rate of complications and death.
- Every year there are approximately 5,000-9,000 hospitalizations and 100 deaths from chickenpox in the United States.
- Almost everyone gets chickenpox by adulthood (more than 95% of Americans). Chickenpox is highly contagious. Approximately 4 million cases occur in the United States each year.
- The virus spreads from person to person by direct contact, or through the air. Approximately 90% of persons in a household who have not had chickenpox will get it if exposed to an infected family member.
- The greatest number of cases of chickenpox occurs in the late winter and spring.
- Chickenpox has a characteristic itchy rash, which then forms blisters that dry and become scabs in 4-5 days. The rash may be the first sign of illness, sometimes coupled with fever and general malaise, which is usually more severe in adults. An infected person may have

anywhere from only a few lesions to more than 500 lesions on his or her body during an attack (average 300-400).

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