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Perspective

Molecular insights into *Bordetella pertussis* : Pathogenesis and immunity

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DESCRIPTION

Pertussis, commonly known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. Despite the availability of vaccines, pertussis continues to pose a significant public health threat, particularly to infants and young children.

The nature of pertussis

Pertussis is characterized by severe coughing fits, often accompanied by a characteristic "whooping" sound as the infected individual gasps for air after a coughing episode. The disease typically progresses through several stages.

Catarrhal stage: This initial stage resembles a common cold, with symptoms such as a runny nose, sneezing, low-grade fever, and mild cough.

Paroxysmal stage: During this stage, the cough becomes more severe and frequent, with episodes of rapid, uncontrollable coughing followed by a sharp intake of breath, producing the characteristic "whoop" sound. These coughing fits can be exhausting and may lead to vomiting or cyanosis (bluish discoloration of the skin).

Convalescent stage: In the final stage, the intensity and frequency of coughing gradually decrease, but symptoms may persist for several weeks or months.

While pertussis can affect individuals of all ages, it is most severe in infants, particularly those under the age of six months who are too young to be fully vaccinated. Complications of *pertussis* can include pneumonia, seizures, encephalopathy (brain inflammation), and even death, especially in infants.

Transmission of pertussis: Pertussis is highly contagious and spreads through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The bacteria can survive on surfaces for extended periods, increasing the risk of transmission through contact with contaminated objects or surfaces.

Infants and young children are the most vulnerable to pertussis, as they have not yet completed the full course of vaccinations and are more likely to experience severe complications. However, adolescents and adults can also contract and transmit the disease, serving as reservoirs for infection.

Prevention of pertussis

Vaccination is the most effective means of preventing pertussis and its complications. The pertussis vaccine is typically administered as part of the DTaP vaccine, which also protects against diphtheria and tetanus. The DTaP vaccine is given in a series of five doses, starting at two months of age and concluding with a booster dose between the ages of four and six years.

In addition to childhood vaccination, booster doses of the tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (Tdap) vaccine are recommended for adolescents and adults, including pregnant women during each pregnancy to provide passive immunity to their newborns.

Other preventive measures

Cocooning: Ensuring that all close contacts of infants, including family members, caregivers, and healthcare providers, are up-to-date with their pertussis vaccinations to reduce the risk of transmission.

Isolation and treatment: Infected individuals should be isolated from others, particularly infants and young children, until they have completed at least five days of appropriate antibiotic treatment.

Good hygiene practices: Practicing good hand hygiene, covering coughs and sneezes, and avoiding close contact with sick individuals can help reduce the spread of pertussis and other respiratory infections.

Challenges in controlling pertussis

Despite the availability of vaccines, pertussis remains a significant public health challenge for several reasons.

Waning immunity: Immunity acquired from vaccination or natural infection wanes over time, leaving individuals susceptible to reinfection or transmission.

Asymptomatic carriers: Infected individuals, particularly adolescents and adults, may experience mild or atypical

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symptoms or be entirely asymptomatic but still capable of transmitting the bacteria to others.

Vaccine hesitancy: Misinformation and misconceptions about vaccines, including concerns about safety and efficacy, can contribute to vaccine hesitancy and suboptimal vaccine coverage rates, allowing outbreaks to occur.

Evolution of B. pertussis: The bacterium Bordetella pertussis has shown the ability to evolve and adapt, potentially leading to changes in its virulence or antigenic properties that could impact vaccine effectiveness.

Pertussis, or whooping cough, remains a significant public health concern, particularly for infants and young children who are most vulnerable to severe complications. While vaccination has significantly reduced the burden of pertussis, ongoing efforts are needed to ensure high vaccine coverage rates, maintain immunity levels in the population, and implement effective control measures to prevent outbreaks. By understanding the nature of pertussis, promoting vaccination, and implementing appropriate preventive measures, we can work together to protect individuals and communities from this preventable infectious disease.