

ANDREW J. SPANO, Westchester County Executive
JOSHUA LIPSMAN, M.D., M.P.H., Commissioner of Health
SUSAN TOLCHIN, Director of Communications

**CONTACT: SUSAN TOLCHIN
MARY LANDRIGAN**

**(914) 995-2932
(914) 813-5013
(914) 813-5000 (After Hours)**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 23, 2003

**WESTCHESTER COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT REMINDS PARENTS
TO PROTECT THEIR CHILDREN WITH THE GIFT OF HEALTH THROUGH VACCINATIONS
Flu and whooping cough will be active during the holidays.**

With the return of cold weather and holiday gatherings, the Westchester County Department of Health is reminding residents to protect themselves and their children from communicable diseases by keeping up-to-date with their vaccinations. Respiratory diseases in particular may be spread through casual contact, a problem that is exacerbated by the close living conditions customary during winter.

“At this time of year people tend to live in closer proximity for longer periods of time,” said Joshua Lipsman, M.D., M.P.H. Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. “Group activities tend to be indoor rather than outdoor events, such as holiday concerts and school plays. That can increase our risk of exposure to some infectious diseases. The good news is that these illnesses can often be prevented by vaccination. These are great gifts for your children.”

The recent pertussis (whooping cough) outbreak in Westchester is a case in point. So far, 54 cases of pertussis have been diagnosed in Westchester this year and the outbreak is not over yet. In most years, only five or six cases are diagnosed. The current outbreak first began among children who had not received the recommended pertussis vaccinations and then spread to vaccinated children whose immunity was not 100 percent. A similar pattern occurred in Putnam County, where a pertussis outbreak this year began primarily among unvaccinated children. Pertussis is one of several illnesses that once claimed the lives of many children but now, thanks to childhood vaccinations, has been greatly reduced in the United States.

MORE

VACCINATIONS – P.2

“Although these illnesses now seem rare or nonexistent in our community, they could remerge if we fail to be diligent with vaccinations,” said Dr. Lipsman. “That happened in Britain, in 1974, when a reduction in the number of vaccinations led to an epidemic of 100,000 pertussis (whooping cough) cases within four years, resulting in 36 deaths. A similar situation occurred in the former Soviet Union with diphtheria,” he said.

One of the most common of the infectious diseases is influenza. “Although we have begun to see flu cases early this year, including in Westchester, there is not currently an influenza outbreak here,” said Dr. Lipsman. However, media reports on the outbreak in Colorado have tremendously increased the demand for flu shots causing a vaccine shortage throughout the nation.

“It is not a good idea to wait until there is an outbreak of illness, or rumors of one, before rushing out to get vaccinated. We have seen this year that demand for flu shots can skyrocket after a worrisome news story, causing shortages that can prevent those who need the protection from getting it,” said Dr. Lipsman. “People need to establish a pattern of getting their flu shot early in the year, every year, if they want to be sure of protection in case an outbreak really does occur. That’s what prevention is all about. Make a note to yourself for 2004.”

“Due to the weather, you may not be able to spend as much time outdoors as you would like during the winter,” said Dr. Lipsman, “But at least try to make sure your family does not get anything more serious than ‘cabin fever’.”

For more information on recommended vaccinations, call the Westchester County Department of Health at (914) 813-5000, or visit our website at www.westchestergov.com/health.