

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis (also called whooping cough) is a very contagious disease caused by a bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. It can cause severe coughing fits which can affect breathing. After fits of many coughs, a person with pertussis often needs to take a deep breath resulting in a “whooping” sound. Pertussis illness is usually not as severe in older children and adults but can cause serious problems and even death in infants and young children.

Who can get pertussis?

Anyone can get pertussis, but it is more common among infants and young children. In recent years, pertussis has become more common in adolescents and adults who have lost the protection they got from vaccination or illness in childhood.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread from person to person through coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. It is also spread through contact with nose and throat discharges by kissing, sharing cigarettes, sharing drinks, or sharing silverware like forks and spoons. People who spend long periods of time with an infected person, such as household members are more likely to get pertussis. In most cases, school classmates, co-workers, and people in clinic waiting rooms are not at risk.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts like a cold with runny nose, mild cough, or fever. Within one to two weeks the cough develops into coughing fits, which are a series of violent coughs during which the person struggles for breath. The coughing fits may be followed by vomiting. The coughing may be followed by a gasping for air which produces a high-pitched whooping sound. The coughing fits can last for up to 10 weeks or more.

In infants, the cough may be minimal or not even there. Infants may also stop breathing for short periods of time or may have cyanosis (blue/purple skin around the mouth due to lack of oxygen).

How long can someone spread pertussis?

Without treatment, an infected person can spread the bacteria from the time he or she starts coughing up to three weeks after the start of the cough (21 days). After five days of treatment with an appropriate antibiotic, an ill person cannot spread the disease.

Can you get pertussis more than once?

Usually, once a person has had pertussis, he or she usually would be protected against another pertussis infection in the near future. However, a person may get pertussis again after a few years have passed.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

Antibiotics are used to treat pertussis. Treatment may make your illness less severe if it is started early. Treatment after three weeks of illness is unlikely to help because the bacteria are gone from your body, even though you may still have a cough.

Once a person is treated for pertussis, they can no longer spread the bacteria. Other therapies such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation may help a child during periods of severe coughing.

Should people who have been around a person with pertussis get medication?

Household and other close contacts of persons with pertussis may need an antibiotic to prevent them from getting pertussis, even if they are vaccinated. Children not current on their pertussis vaccination and adolescents or adults may also be recommended to receive a pertussis vaccine to help protect from future exposures.

What can I do to protect myself from pertussis?

The best way to prevent yourself and your family from pertussis is to get the pertussis vaccine. Two vaccines are available to protect against pertussis. The childhood vaccine is called DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis) and is given to children at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 12-15 months of age, and a booster between 4 and 6 years of age. The adult and adolescent vaccine is called Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis), and should replace one dose of the Td booster (tetanus-diphtheria) after the childhood series.

Talk with your healthcare provider or local health department if you have other questions about the vaccines.

Along with getting the vaccine, what other ways can I help protect myself from pertussis?

Practicing good hygiene habits can prevent and reduce the spread of pertussis and other respiratory infections. Remember to wash hands often with soap and water and cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.