

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is Pertussis (Whooping Cough)?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a disease that affects the lungs. Pertussis bacteria are spread from person to person through the air. A person with pertussis develops a severe cough that usually lasts 4 to 6 weeks or longer. Pertussis can be serious, especially in infants.

Who Can Get Pertussis?

Anyone of any age can get pertussis. More than half of reported cases are in teenagers and adults who usually have less severe illness.

How is Pertussis Spread?

Pertussis can spread from person to person by direct contact with the fluids from the mouth and nose of someone with pertussis. This can happen when a person with pertussis coughs or sneezes on you, or by touching the fluid and then touching your eyes, nose or mouth.

In general, you are at greater risk of getting pertussis if you are within 3 feet of someone with pertussis for at least 10 hours a week. This is considered close contact.

Pertussis is most infectious about 1 week after exposure until about 3 weeks after the severe coughing starts.

People who have pertussis but have completed 5 days of antibiotics (medicines) can no longer spread the disease.

What are the Symptoms of Pertussis?

- The first symptoms of pertussis are similar to a cold: sneezing, a runny nose, possibly a low-grade fever, and a cough.
- After 1 or 2 weeks, the cough becomes severe.
 - The cough occurs in sudden, bursts you cannot control. One cough follows the next without a break for breath.
 - Many children will make a high-pitched whooping sound when breathing in after a coughing episode. Whooping is less common in infants and adults.
 - During or after a coughing spell, you may gag or vomit (throw up).
 - Your face or lips may look blue from lack of oxygen.
 - The cough is often worse at night.
 - Coughing episodes slowly occur less often, but may last for several weeks or months until the lungs heal.

How is Pertussis Found?

Your health care provider will give you an exam and review your symptoms. Your provider may want to take a swab of the back of your throat through your nose. The sample will be tested in the lab.

How is Pertussis Treated?

Pertussis can be treated with antibiotics. The medicine will reduce spreading the disease but will only help reduce symptoms if started early in your illness (before the strong coughing begins).

Your health care provider will talk with you about how best to treat your or your child's case of pertussis.

How is Pertussis Prevented (DTaP Vaccine)?

If you have children, make sure they receive the DTaP vaccines (shot) on time. The vaccine is typically given as a 5-dose series at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15 to 18 months and 4 to 6 years old.

The shot can prevent diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis. Preteens should get one dose of the Tdap vaccine at 11 to 12 years old as a booster.

Since pertussis is so dangerous for infants, it is recommended that pregnant women get a dose of the Tdap vaccine during their third trimesters. This help protect the baby from getting whooping cough from mom in the first few months of life.

How Else Can You Prevent Pertussis?

- Avoid close contact with anyone who is coughing or sick.
- Wash your hands with soap and water often.
- Stay at home if you are not feeling well.
- Cover your cough with a tissue or cough into your sleeve.
- Call your health care provider if you have symptoms on page 1.
- Get a vaccination if you will be in close contact with a newborn.

What are the Possible Side Effects of Pertussis?

- The most common side effect is bacterial pneumonia.
- Infants are more likely to develop problems because pertussis is often more severe in them than older children or adults.
- Rarely, pertussis can cause seizures, inflammation of the brain and death.

How Long Should Infected People Stay Home From Work or School?

- Stay home and avoid close contact with others until you have taken antibiotics for at least 5 full days.
- Stay home for at least 3 weeks after your cough starts if you are not taking antibiotics.

**Information adapted from the
Minnesota Department of Health and the
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.**