

quick facts

About...Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a contagious disease caused by *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria. It may cause severe coughing fits that can interfere with breathing. Although pertussis is often milder in older children and adults, undiagnosed persons can transmit the disease to infants and young children. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, seizures, and sometimes death. Most of these serious problems occur in infants who are younger than a year old.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The symptoms of pertussis occur in three stages:

1. During the first stage, symptoms are similar to a cold: slight fever, sneezing, runny nose, dry cough, loss of appetite, and irritability.
2. During the second stage (about 1 to 2 weeks later), the cough becomes more intense. There may be short, intense coughing spells followed by a long gasp for air (this is when the “whoop” is heard). The coughing fits may be followed by vomiting, nose bleeds, or bluish color to the face.
3. During the third stage, the cough is less intense and less frequent, and appetite begins to increase. Eventually the cough stops, although this may take several months.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread by contact with nose or throat secretions from an infected person. This can happen when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Without treatment, an infected person can spread the disease for up to three weeks from the time the cough begins. However, after five days of treatment with the appropriate antibiotic, an infected person cannot spread pertussis.

Who is at risk for pertussis?

Pertussis transmission continues in the United States. People who have not completed a full series of pertussis vaccine or who have not received pertussis vaccine for several years are at increased risk for pertussis. Infants who are too young to be fully vaccinated are at greatest risk for severe illness and death from pertussis-related complications. Adolescents and adults may also experience complications from pertussis, but the risk of

death is greatest in those who have underlying medical conditions such as neuromuscular disorders.

How do I know if I have pertussis?

If you have had close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with pertussis or if you have symptoms that match those described above, you should consult your health care provider. Your health care provider may test you for pertussis and prescribe antibiotics for treatment.

How is pertussis treated?

While antibiotics make pertussis less contagious, they do not reduce the symptoms unless taken very early in the illness. All household members and other close contacts of persons with pertussis should receive antibiotic treatment to prevent transmission of the disease.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Children should be up-to-date on vaccinations, especially the diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DTaP) series. Adolescents and adults (ages 10 through 64) should also receive one dose of Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis) vaccine to provide further protection against pertussis. It is particularly important that anyone having contact with an infant be fully vaccinated with the appropriate pertussis vaccine for their age.* See your health care provider to determine if you need immunization against pertussis.

*Note: DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis) vaccine is a five dose series for children under 7 years of age. It is typically given at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 12-15 months, and 4-6 years of age. Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis) vaccine is a pertussis booster vaccine that should be given one time to all adolescents and adults ages 10 through 64. Tdap also contains tetanus and diphtheria protection and can be used in place of one regular tetanus-diphtheria booster.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/pertussis/in-short-both.htm>.

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