

## What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis (also called whooping cough) is a disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis* that spreads from person-to-person with close contact. It may cause severe coughing fits which can affect breathing. Pertussis is often milder in older children and adults, but can cause serious problems in infants. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, convulsions, inflammation of the brain and sometimes death. Most of these serious problems occur in infants who are less than one year old.

## Who can get pertussis?

Pertussis can occur in any age group; however, pertussis is more common among infants since they are too young to have full protection from the vaccine. Pertussis is also 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 one person to another through respiratory droplets from the nose or throat of an infected person by coughing or sneezing, and then inhaled by another person close by. Germs can also be picked up by hands and spread through touching your eyes, nose or mouth, although this is not as common. 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 symptoms of runny nose and an irritating cough. 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. Infants may also stop breathing for short periods of time, and may also become bluish around their mouth and nose area.

## How long is a person with pertussis able to spread it?

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

## Can a person get pertussis again?

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 such as azithromycin, erythromycin, clarithromycin or trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole are used to decrease spread of pertussis. Supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation may help a child during the prolonged period of severe coughing. Even though a person may continue coughing, after five days of treatment with appropriate antibiotics they can no longer spread pertussis.

## Should people who have been around a person with pertussis be treated?

All household and other close contacts of persons with pertussis, regardless of age, should receive an antibiotic to prevent getting pertussis. All close contacts under seven years of age who have not had four doses of DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus and acellular pertussis) should receive the vaccine on time and other children may need a booster dose. Adults may also be recommended to receive the adult vaccine (Tdap).

**Is there a vaccine that can prevent pertussis?**

The main way that pertussis is prevented is by receiving a pertussis vaccination. 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. After the series is complete, DTaP vaccination is 80% to 88% effective against pertussis infection.

Although DTaP vaccine usually provides adequate protection against pertussis, the effects of the vaccine wear off over time, leaving most teens and adults at risk of the disease. Recently, an adolescent and adult vaccine called **Tdap** (tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis) became available to prevent pertussis and is recommended for persons aged 10–65 years. This vaccine 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.

**Where can I go to receive pertussis vaccine?**

Contact your health care provider or county health department to find out where the vaccine is available.

**What else can I do to protect myself from pertussis?**

Good hygiene habits prevent and reduce the transmission of pertussis and other respiratory infections including:

- covering your mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when sneezing or coughing
- disposing of tissues properly
- washing hands frequently
- using alcohol-based hand sanitizers if hands are not visibly soiled.

