



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Boston Public Health Commission
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Pertussis

“Whooping Cough”

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (also called “whooping cough”) is a respiratory illness caused by a bacteria that is easily spread from person to person. A person with pertussis can have severe coughing spasms that last for weeks.

Is pertussis dangerous?

Pertussis is usually mild in older children and adults, but can be dangerous for infants and young children. Although rare, pertussis can cause death especially among infants less than six months of age. Pertussis can cause breathing problems, pneumonia, seizures, and swelling of the brain (encephalopathy).

How is it spread?

The bacteria that causes pertussis lives in the nose, mouth and throat and is sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, cough or talks. People nearby can then breathe in the germs. Transmission of pertussis occurs by droplets or direct contact with mucus or saliva from an infected person. People with pertussis can spread the disease starting two weeks before until three weeks after their cough starts. However, treatment with appropriate antibiotics can make a person non-contagious after five days.

Who gets pertussis?

In Massachusetts, pertussis is most common among people 10 to 20 years old who have lost the protection they received from their childhood vaccinations. These adolescents and young adults can be a source of infection for infants and under-immunized children.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The illness starts with cold-like symptoms such as a runny nose, sneezing and mild cough. The cough gradually worsens over a one to two week period. The person may develop uncontrolled coughing spasms often followed by either a high-pitched whooping noise when the person breathes in or vomiting. The coughing fits usually last one to six weeks.

How is pertussis treated?

Treatment with antibiotics may shorten the time a person is able to transmit the disease to others and may modify the disease course if started early. Rest and plenty of fluids also help most people feel better. Anyone who has been in close contact to a pertussis case should contact their healthcare provider immediately.

Can pertussis be prevented?

Vaccination is the best way to protect against pertussis. Pertussis vaccine is usually combined with tetanus and diphtheria vaccines (called DTaP or DTP) and given to children at **2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15-18 months** with another booster shot at **4-6 years** old. Adolescents and adults cannot receive DTaP or DTP but can get a vaccine called Tdap to protect against pertussis, tetanus, and diphtheria. At this time, only one dose of Tdap vaccine is recommended. The Tdap

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vaccine is usually given to adolescents at 11 to 12 years of age. Adults may also receive Tdap vaccine instead of a regular tetanus (Td) shot.

If I had pertussis in the past, can I get it again?

A person who had pertussis in the past may have some immunity, but this *may weaken over time*. For this reason, people exposed to pertussis should see their doctor for antibiotics, even if they had the disease in the past. Children less than 7 years old who were exposed to another person with pertussis should have their immunization record reviewed by their doctor to make sure all shots are up to date. Adolescents and adults who have never received a single booster dose of Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, acellular pertussis) vaccine should talk to their doctor about getting a shot.

**For more information, please contact
Boston Public Health Commission
Communicable Disease Control
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