



Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (also called “whooping cough”) is a respiratory illness caused by 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 serious health and breathing problems such as pneumonia, seizures, and swelling of the brain (encephalopathy), especially among infants less than six months of age.

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. Spread 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?

Anyone can get pertussis, however it is increasing among infants and youth aged 11-19 years. These adolescents and young adults can be a source of infection for other 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 make the illness less severe if started early. Rest and plenty of fluids also help most people feel better. Anyone who has been in close contact to a person with pertussis should contact their healthcare provider immediately.

Can pertussis be prevented?

A vaccine is the best way to protect against pertussis. The usual schedule for infants is a series of four doses of DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, and acellular pertussis vaccine) given at 2, 4, 6, and 15–18 months of age. A fifth shot, or booster dose, is recommended between age 4 and 6 years, unless the fourth dose was given late (after the fourth birthday).

For people who were never vaccinated or who may have started but not completed a series of shots, a 3-dose series of Td (tetanus and diphtheria vaccine) should be given with 1 to 2 months between dose #1 and #2, and 6 to 12 months between dose #2 and #3. For people younger than age 65 years, one of the doses, preferably the first should also contain the pertussis component in the form of Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccine). Adults ages 65 years and older may also get Tdap.

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Because immunity to diphtheria and tetanus decreases with time, boosters of Td are needed every ten years.

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 healthcare provider 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 healthcare provider 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 healthcare provider about getting a shot.

