



# Public Health Fact Sheet

## Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

### What is pertussis?

- Pertussis (whooping cough) is a very contagious bacterial infection of the respiratory tract. The bacteria are found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person.

### Who gets pertussis?

- Pertussis can occur at any age. It is most dangerous to infants and very young children, especially those who have not had three doses of pertussis vaccine.
- It can also cause severe coughing in adults and older children that lasts for many weeks to months.

### What are the symptoms of pertussis?

- Symptoms usually appear between seven to 10 days after exposure to the bacteria, but sometimes it takes as long as 21 days. The disease starts with cold-type symptoms: low-grade fever, runny nose and cough.
- In one to two weeks a second stage develops with repeated attacks of severe coughing followed, in young children, by a crowing or high pitched whoop (hence the name whooping cough). Adults and older children rarely experience the whoop.
- During bouts of coughing, the lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air. Vomiting may occur after severe coughing spells, and coughing is often worse at night.
- During the early second stage of pertussis, seizures or even death can occur, particularly in infants.
- Immunized school children, teens and adults usually have milder symptoms than young children, and may often appear fairly healthy in between episodes of coughing. The second stage can last one to two months or longer, with coughing spells gradually decreasing over that time.

### How is pertussis spread?

- Pertussis is spread through droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks in close proximity to another person.
- The greatest risk of spread is during the early stage when pertussis appears to be a cold, although it is possible to spread the bacteria for 21 days after the onset of coughing.
- Those treated with appropriate antibiotics are considered contagious until they have completed five days of treatment.

### How is pertussis diagnosed?

- A health care provider may suspect pertussis because of the symptoms, but the only way to be sure is to take a sample of mucus from the back of the nose (nasal wash) and send it to a lab for a specific test.

### What is the treatment for pertussis?

- A health care provider must prescribe an effective antibiotic such as Azithromycin, Clarithromycin, or erythromycin. These antibiotics will reduce the contagious period, but they will not reduce the cough symptoms unless taken in the very early stage of the infection.

### Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

- Yes. The vaccine for pertussis is given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. Infants and children's vaccine — DTP (the older vaccine) or DTaP (the newer vaccine) — is given at 2, 4, and 6 months of age, with boosters at 15—18 months and at 4—6 years of age.
- Two newer pertussis vaccines (Tdap) are available for use in adolescents and adults as a booster to the primary childhood series.

### What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

- The most effective measure is to maintain the highest level of immunization in our children in the community. Parents should ensure that their children are up-to-date on their shots.
- Persons with pertussis should avoid contact with others until they have taken five full days of the appropriate antibiotic, and complete the full course of treatment prescribed.
- Persons living with someone who has pertussis or persons who have been in very close, continuous contact with them should obtain appropriate preventive antibiotics (without waiting for symptoms to develop).

More information on pertussis: [www.cdc.gov/pertussis/](http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/)

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