

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

## What is Pertussis?

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a very contagious disease caused by bacteria (germs). Pertussis is usually mild in older children and adults, but it often causes serious problems in very young children (i.e., infants less than one year of age).

## What are the symptoms of Pertussis?

The early symptoms of pertussis often begin like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, fever and cough which can last 1 to 2 weeks. The cough gradually becomes worse. The next stage of pertussis includes uncontrolled coughing spells followed by a whooping noise when a person breathes in. During these severe coughing spells, a person may vomit, or their lips or face may look blue from a lack of oxygen. Between coughing spells, a person may appear well. The coughing spells may be so bad that it is hard for babies to eat, drink or breathe. This stage usually lasts 4-6 weeks. Adults, teens and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that mimic bronchitis or asthma. Some infants may have apnea (unable to breathe) and can die.

## Who gets Pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age but is most common in infants younger than 6 months of age and children 10 to 14 years of age. Approximately half of infants less than 1 year of age who get pertussis are hospitalized.

## How is Pertussis spread?

The bacteria are found in the mouths, noses, and throats of infected people. The bacteria are spread in the air by droplets produced during sneezing or coughing. Symptoms usually appear 7-10 days after inhaling these droplets.

## How long can a person spread Pertussis?

Pertussis is very contagious during the early stage of the illness and becomes less contagious by the end of 3 weeks. Antibiotics will shorten the contagious period of the illness.

## How is Pertussis diagnosed?

A sample of mucus from the back of the nose must be taken during the early stage of the illness in order to grow the bacteria. Laboratory tests can be done on the sample to identify the bacteria.

## How is Pertussis treated?

Infants < 6 months of age and persons with severe cases often require hospitalization and severe cases may require oxygen and mild sedation to help control coughing spells. Antibiotics may make the illness less severe if started in the early stage of the disease.

## Can pertussis be prevented?

Yes, there is a vaccine to prevent pertussis. It is given along with diphtheria and/or tetanus vaccines in the same shot (called DTaP or Tdap). The vaccine works for most children, but it wears off after a number of years. At least 4 doses before starting Kindergarten are necessary to protect a child.

## When should antibiotics be used to prevent pertussis?

After exposure to an infectious pertussis patient, antibiotics should be given to persons at high risk of developing severe pertussis, persons who will have close contact with those at high risk of developing severe pertussis, and all household contacts within 21 days of cough onset in the patient with pertussis.

## What else is done to prevent Pertussis?

- Giving a series of shots to children at 2, 4, 6, and 15 months of age and again before a child enters school.
- Giving booster doses to adolescents 11 to 18 years of age and into adulthood.
- Vaccination of pregnant women with Tdap during each pregnancy is important to help protect infants.
- Recommending Tdap to any close contacts or caregivers of a newborn if they have not previously been vaccinated with Tdap.
- Anyone who develops symptoms within 21 days of exposure to an infectious pertussis patient should be excluded from daycare, school, or healthcare settings until a diagnosis can be made and, if needed, appropriate treatment occurs.
- Persons with pertussis should avoid contact with others until they have taken 5 full days of an appropriate antibiotic or they should remain in respiratory isolation for 3 weeks if they do not take an appropriate antibiotic.

## Where can I get more information?

Visit [www.cdc.gov/pertussis/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/index.html) or call your local health department.