

WHOOPING COUGH (PERTUSSIS)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory disease. It is caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*.

What are the symptoms of pertussis infection?

Symptoms usually appear 4 to 21 days after exposure to someone with the illness. The symptoms of pertussis occur in three stages.

- The first stage begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever and cough. The cough may be mild at first but soon gets worse.
- The second stage includes uncontrolled coughing or coughing spasms followed by a whooping noise when the person breathes in air. During these severe coughing spells, a person may vomit, or their lips or face may look blue from a lack of oxygen. The infected person may appear well between coughing spells. This stage may last several weeks.
- The third stage is the last stage where the cough slowly begins to disappear. This stage may also last for several weeks.

How is pertussis spread?

The bacterium that causes pertussis is found in the nose and throat of infected people. These bacteria spread through the air in droplets produced when an infected person sneezes and/or coughs. Persons in the early stage of illness are the most contagious.

How long are people contagious?

After five days of the proper antibiotics, people are no longer contagious. If a person does not take antibiotics, s/he is contagious for 21 days after the onset of the coughing spasms.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age, but vaccination lowers the risk. It most commonly occurs in very young children who have not been vaccinated. Older children and adults may also get pertussis, but usually a milder form of the illness.

What treatment is available for people with pertussis?

Antibiotics will shorten the length of time the person is contagious and the length of time the illness can be spread. If started in the early stage of the disease, antibiotics may make the illness less severe. However, even with the antibiotics, people may cough for many weeks.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

People sick with a cough should be kept home until they have been treated with antibiotics for at least five days and are well enough to return to school, work or daycare.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting pertussis?

- If you are a household member or high-risk close contact of a person with pertussis, take the proper preventive antibiotics.
- Keep up to date on vaccinations. Pertussis-containing vaccine is given at 2, 4, 6, and 12-18 months of age and when a child enters school. Persons 11-18 years of age should receive a single booster dose of pertussis vaccine, preferably at 11-12 years of age. All adults should have a Tdap booster if they haven't had one.
- Pregnant women need a Tdap at each pregnancy
- Keep infants away from people who are sick. Cover your cough and wash your hands frequently if you are coughing or sneezing. See your healthcare provider right away if you develop symptoms.