

PERTUSSIS (WHOOPING COUGH)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a highly contagious infection of the respiratory tract caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. Anyone can become ill with pertussis, but it is particularly severe in the first year of life and may require hospitalization.

Adolescents and adults previously vaccinated and not up to date on booster doses may be at risk for getting pertussis and passing the infection to those at risk because the vaccine weakens over time. Newborns are most at risk to develop complications, especially if they are infected before they can receive or complete their vaccinations.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The range of symptoms and the severity of the disease can vary according to a person's age, the degree of immunity, the use of antibiotics and if pertussis exists along with another respiratory infection. Symptoms usually develop between nine and 10 days after exposure to the bacteria but may appear anywhere from six to 20 days afterwards. Early symptoms resemble those of the common cold. They can last for one to two weeks and usually include:

- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Low grade fever
- Mild, occasional cough

One to two weeks after symptoms start, people may develop:

- Explosive, uncontrollable coughing fits that can interrupt breathing, eating and sleeping
- A high pitched "whooping" sound as they struggle to inhale air (giving the disease its common name "whooping cough")
- Vomiting during and after coughing fits
- Exhaustion following a fit

Coughing episodes can occur on their own or can be triggered by yawning, stretching, laughing, eating or yelling. The severe coughing spells usually continue for four to eight weeks but can last longer.

In older children, adolescents and adults, symptoms are usually milder and without the typical whoop, especially in individuals vaccinated against pertussis.

How does pertussis spread?

Pertussis is a very contagious disease. It is caused by the *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria, which live in an infected person's mouth, nose and throat. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, the bacteria can be sprayed into the air and breathed in by people who are nearby. You can also become infected through direct contact with discharges from the nose or throat of an infected person.

A person who is infected with *Bordetella pertussis* can spread the bacteria to others from the onset of symptoms until 21 days after the

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cough starts, if left untreated. If antibiotic treatment is started, the person is no longer contagious after five days of treatment.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are commonly used to treat pertussis and may help eliminate symptoms when given early. If not given early, antibiotics may not reduce the length or severity of symptoms.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Immunization is the most effective way to prevent pertussis. To prevent the spread of pertussis to others, a person who has the disease should:

- Stay away from school/workplace/daycare and avoid contact with others until they have completed five days of antibiotic treatment. If not taking antibiotics, they should stay at home for 21 days from the onset of the cough
- Notify anyone, especially pregnant women and parents of babies and young children, that have had recent contact with a person infected with pertussis

People who have been in contact with an infectious person should:

- Check their immunization records to be sure they have been immunized against pertussis
- Watch for signs of whooping cough and/or a cough that lasts more than a week without improvement

Other precautions include:

- Wash your hands well and often with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds. If soap and water are unavailable, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw the tissue out immediately. Wash your hands afterwards. Cough in your upper sleeve if you do not have a tissue

People at greater risk of complications, such as young children, babies and pregnant women in their third trimester who have been in close contact with someone with pertussis (e.g., live in the same household, attend the same daycare or share the same airspace for extended periods) may be advised to take antibiotics to protect them from the disease.

