

Pertussis (whooping cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, commonly known as “whooping cough,” is an illness caused by a bacterium that affects the respiratory tract (nose, throat and lungs). Complications may include ear infections, pneumonia, hernias, lung collapse, seizures and brain damage. Some severe cases can lead to death. Pertussis is an especially serious illness for children under one year of age. Pertussis has become more common in the United States and Colorado in the last decade.

Symptoms

Symptoms of pertussis usually appear within 7-10 days, but can appear from 5-21 days after exposure to an infected person. Pertussis usually begins with cold-like symptoms, which can include a mild, irritating cough, runny nose, and low-grade fever. Within 1-2 weeks, the cough becomes more severe and often occurs as coughing fits, which can be more frequent at night. Severe coughing fits may be followed by a high-pitched “whoop” sound, vomiting, breathlessness, or a change in the color of the face or lips. The coughing fits can last for 2-12 weeks, gradually becoming less frequent.

How do I get pertussis?

Pertussis is spread by breathing in droplets of an infected person’s cough or sneeze. Usually people become infected when they are in close contact (an arm’s length away) for an extended period of time or live in the same household with an infected person.

How long is an infected person contagious (able to spread the disease)?

- WITHOUT treatment – contagious for up to **3 weeks**.
- WITH antibiotic treatment – contagious until they have had **5 days** of antibiotics.

Prevention

Immunization is the most effective way to prevent pertussis.

- All children should be immunized with five doses of DTaP (Diphtheria, Tetanus, acellular Pertussis) vaccine. The DTaP vaccine is given at two, four, six, and 12-18 months of age, and between four and six years of age.
- Children under 7 years of age who are not appropriately immunized against pertussis should receive the DTaP vaccines they need.
- A new pertussis vaccine (Tdap) was licensed in the summer of 2005 for use in adolescents and adults, and may be available from your health care provider.
- If you live with or are often in close contact with a person who has pertussis, you should receive antibiotic treatment even if you do not have symptoms or have been immunized against pertussis.

Treatment

- If you think you may have pertussis, see a health care provider immediately for testing and treatment. If you work with small children, be sure the health care provider tests you for pertussis. Pertussis is diagnosed by testing nasal secretions.
- If you have been exposed to pertussis **and a cough has already started**, see a health care provider and stay home – **do not** go to school, child care, work, church or other public places until you have taken the recommended antibiotic treatment for **5 full days**.
- Pertussis is treated with antibiotics. Current information on effective antibiotics is available to you and your doctor through your local or state health department.