

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What You Need to Know

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a highly contagious, bacterial (*Bordetella Pertussis*) disease marked by severe, prolonged coughing. It is sometimes called the “100-day cough”. It is named after the "whoop" sound children and adults make when they try to breathe in during or after a severe coughing spell.

Who gets it?

Pertussis can occur at any age, but infants and young children are at highest risk of life-threatening consequences. Pertussis is commonly misdiagnosed and under-diagnosed. Undiagnosed mild disease in older children, adolescents, and adults contributes to the spread of the illness among infants and young children. Individuals can get Pertussis more than once, and vaccine protection fades over time.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is caused by a bacteria found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. People infected with Pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others who breathe in tiny droplets with Pertussis bacteria.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms are usually mild at first and similar to cold or flu-like symptoms such as:

- Runny nose
- Mild fever
- Mild cough
- Red, watery eyes
- Apnea – a long pause in breathing (in babies).

1-2 weeks later, coughing worsens, but cold-like symptoms improve. The person may not appear ill between coughing attacks. At this stage thick mucus accumulates inside airways, causing uncontrollable coughing. Severe and prolonged coughing attacks may:

- Paroxysms (fits) of many, rapid coughs followed by a high-pitched "whoop"
- End with a high-pitched "whoop" sound during the next breath of air
- Result in a red or blue face
- Vomiting (throwing up) during or after coughing fits
- Causes extreme fatigue

Usually in many people, a prolonged cough is present, but without the "whoop". Sometimes, a persistent, hacking cough is the only sign that an adolescent or adult has whooping cough. Recovery occurs gradually over 2 to 3 weeks. Fever, if present, is usually mild.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms appear between 6 to 21 days (average 7-10) after exposure to the bacteria.

When and for how long can it be spread?

The contagious period is from 7 days following exposure to 3 weeks after onset of severe coughing spells. It is most contagious during the first two to three weeks of infection, often before the beginning of severe coughing spells.

Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

Children who have recovered from culture-confirmed pertussis do not need further doses of pertussis vaccine.

How do you treat it?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics and patients are advised to take all prescribed medication and avoid contact with anyone, particularly small infants and children.

Anyone who is exposed to pertussis should also be given antibiotics to prevent the disease.

What are some potential complications?

Pneumonia is the most common complication and cause of pertussis-related deaths.

Young infants are at highest risk for pertussis-related complications, including seizures, encephalopathy (swelling of the brain), and otitis media (severe ear infection). There are about 10-15 deaths each year in the United States.

How do you prevent it?

- Immunization against pertussis with DTaP vaccine is recommended by both the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and should be administered in 5 doses: at 2, 4, 6, and 15-18 months of age and 4 – 6 years of age. There is also a booster immunization for adolescents and adults.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water running water after contact with secretions from the nose or mouth
- Cover nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing. Use tissue or your sleeve. Dispose of used tissues.
- Clean dirty surfaces and soiled items like toys and countertops with soap and water, then disinfect with a solution of 2 teaspoons of household bleach to 4 cups of water.
- People who develop the symptoms of Pertussis within 21 days of exposure should stay home and call their health care providers

For more information on Pertussis Disease, call (816) 325-7204

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