

# PERTUSSIS (Whooping Cough)

## What is pertussis?

Pertussis or whooping cough is a disease of the nose and throat caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*.

## What are the symptoms of pertussis infection?

The symptoms of pertussis occur in 3 stages. Symptoms usually appear 4 to 21 days after exposure to someone with the illness.

- The first stage begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever and cough. The cough lasts 1-2 weeks and then 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 2-6 weeks.
- The third stage is the last stage and where symptoms begin to disappear. This stage may last 2 weeks or more.

## 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 5 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 or 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?

Antibiotics will shorten the length of time the illness can be spread: ill persons 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?

- Take the proper preventive antibiotics if you are a household member or close contact of a person with pertussis, whether or not you have been immunized.
- Keep your children up-to-date on their vaccinations; pertussis vaccine is given at 2, 4, 6, and 15 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.
- Adults may also receive a single booster dose of pertussis vaccine if they have not previously had a booster.
- See your healthcare provider right away if you develop symptoms.



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