

Quick Facts: Pertussis (Whooping Cough)



What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a disease caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. It may cause coughing fits that can cause breathing problems. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, seizures, and sometimes death. Most of these serious problems occur in infants who are less than one year old. Pertussis is generally milder in older children and adults, but it can cause serious illness in people of any age.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The symptoms of pertussis usually occur in three stages:

1. During the first stage, symptoms are like a cold: slight fever, sneezing, runny nose and mild cough.
2. During the second stage (about 1-2 weeks later), the cough becomes more intense. There may be rapid, intense coughing spells followed by a long gasp for air with a "whoop" sound. The coughing fits may be followed by vomiting, nose bleeds, or bluish color to the lips or face.
3. During the third stage, the cough is less intense and less frequent. The cough eventually stops, but this may take several months.

Some babies who have pertussis may not have a cough. Instead, babies with pertussis may turn blue, struggle to breathe, or have pauses in breathing (apnea).

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread by contact with nose or throat droplets from an infected person. This can happen when an infected person coughs or sneezes. An infected person can spread the disease for up to three weeks from the time the cough begins. However, after five days of antibiotics, an infected person cannot spread pertussis.

Who is at risk for pertussis?

People who haven't received all recommended doses of pertussis vaccines are at higher risk for pertussis. Occasionally, vaccinated persons may still get pertussis, but the disease is usually milder than in unvaccinated persons. Infants less than one year old are at greatest risk for severe illness and death from pertussis.

How do I know if I have pertussis?

If you have had close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with pertussis or if you have symptoms of pertussis, you should talk to your doctor. Your doctor may test you for pertussis.

How is pertussis treated?

Pertussis can be treated with antibiotics. While antibiotics make pertussis less contagious, they do not get rid of the cough unless taken very early in the illness. Everyone who lives in the same house as someone with pertussis should receive antibiotics to prevent spreading pertussis to others. Some other close contacts, such as people at high risk for severe pertussis or who have contact with those at high risk for severe pertussis, might need antibiotics as well. Doctors and health departments help determine who should receive antibiotics after exposure to pertussis.

How can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis is by staying up to date with pertussis vaccines. The diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DTaP) vaccine is a five-dose series for children under 7 years of age. Preteens should receive a dose of the tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis (Tdap) vaccine. Additionally, teens and adults who have not received a dose of Tdap vaccine should also get one dose of Tdap. **Pregnant women should get one dose of Tdap during each pregnancy.** It is very important that anyone having contact with an infant be fully vaccinated with the correct pertussis vaccine for their age. Tdap can be given no matter how much time has passed since the last dose of tetanus vaccine. See your doctor to decide if you or anyone in your family needs a vaccine against pertussis.

All information presented is intended for public use. More information on pertussis (whooping cough) can be found at: <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/index.html>.

