

## Quick Facts

### **About...Pertussis (Whooping Cough)**

#### **What is pertussis?**

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a contagious disease caused by *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria. It may cause severe coughing fits that can interfere with breathing. Although pertussis is often milder in older children and adults, undiagnosed persons can transmit the disease to infants and young children. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, seizures, and sometimes death. Most of these serious problems occur in infants who are younger than a year old. Indiana had 271 reported cases in 2008 and 392 in 2009.

#### **What are the symptoms of pertussis?**

Their symptoms of pertussis occur in three stages:

1. During the first stage, symptoms are similar to a cold: slight fever, sneezing, runny nose, dry cough, loss of appetite, and irritability.
2. During the second stage (about 1 to 2 weeks later), the cough becomes more intense. There may be short, intense coughing spells followed by a long gasp for air (this is when the “whoop” is heard). The coughing fits may be followed by vomiting, nose bleeds, or bluish color to the face.
3. During the third stage, the cough is less intense and less frequent, and appetite begins to increase. Eventually the cough stops, although this may take several months.

#### **How is pertussis spread?**

Pertussis is spread by contact with nose or throat secretions from an infected person. This can happen when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Without treatment, an infected person can spread the disease for up to three weeks from the time the cough begins. However, after five days of treatment with the appropriate antibiotic, an infected person cannot spread pertussis.

## **Who is at risk for pertussis?**

Pertussis transmission continues in the United States. People who have not completed a full series of pertussis vaccine or who have not received pertussis vaccine for several years are at increased risk for pertussis. Infants who are too young to be fully vaccinated are at greatest risk for severe illness and death from pertussis-related complications. Adolescents and adults may also experience complications from pertussis, but the risk of death is greatest in those who have underlying medical conditions such as neuromuscular disorders.

## **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 that match those described above, you should consult your health care provider. Your health care provider may test you for pertussis and prescribe antibiotics for treatment.

## **How is pertussis treated?**

While antibiotics make pertussis less contagious, they do not reduce the symptoms unless taken very early in the illness. All household members and other close contacts of persons with pertussis should receive antibiotic treatment to prevent transmission of the disease.

## **How can pertussis be prevented?**

Children should be up-to-date on vaccinations, especially the diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DTaP) series<sup>‡</sup>. Adolescents and adults (ages 10 through 64) should also receive one dose of Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis) vaccine to provide further protection against pertussis. It is particularly important that anyone having contact with an infant be fully vaccinated with the appropriate pertussis vaccine for their age. In October 2010, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) issued new recommendations for the use of Tdap. ACIP recommends that adults aged 65 years and older (e.g., grandparents, child-care providers, and health-care practitioners) who have or who anticipate having close contact with an infant less than 12 months of age and who previously have not received Tdap should receive a single dose of Tdap. For other adults aged 65 years and older, a single dose of Tdap vaccine may be given instead of Td vaccine, in persons who have not previously received Tdap. Tdap can be administered regardless of interval since the last tetanus or diphtheria vaccine. ACIP recommends that children aged 7 through 10 years who are not fully vaccinated<sup>†</sup> against pertussis and for whom no contraindication to pertussis vaccine exists should receive a single dose of Tdap to provide protection against pertussis. If additional doses of tetanus and diphtheria vaccines are needed, then children aged 7 through 10 years should be vaccinated according to catch-up guidance, with Tdap preferred as the first dose.

<sup>‡</sup>DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis) vaccine is a five dose series for children under 7 years of age. It is typically given at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 12-15 months, and 4-6 years of age.

<sup>†</sup>Fully vaccinated is defined as 5 doses of DTaP or 4 doses of DTaP if the fourth dose was administered on or after the fourth birthday.

\* See your health care provider to determine if you need immunization against pertussis.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Pertussis/>

This page was last reviewed on March 3, 2011.