

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis (also called whooping cough) is a disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis* that spreads from person-to-person with close contact. It may cause severe coughing fits which can interfere with breathing. Pertussis is often milder in older children and adults, but can cause serious problems in infants. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, convulsions, inflammation of the brain and sometimes death. Most of these serious problems occur in infants who are less than a year old.

Who can get pertussis?

Pertussis can occur in any age group, however, pertussis is more common among infants since they are too young to have full protection from the vaccine. Pertussis is also more common in adolescents and adults who have lost the protection they got from vaccination or illness in childhood.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread from one person to another when respiratory droplets are expelled from the nose or throat of an infected person through coughing or sneezing, and then inhaled by another person close by. It is most readily spread to those who have prolonged close contact with an infected person, such as household members. In most cases, school classmates, co-workers, and people in clinic waiting rooms are not considered at risk. The spread of pertussis through contaminated objects occurs rarely if at all.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts like a cold with symptoms of runny nose and an irritating cough. Within one to two weeks the cough develops into coughing fits - a series of violent coughs during which the person struggles for breath. The coughing is followed by a gasping for air which produces a high-pitched whooping sound. The coughing fits occur more frequently at night and may be followed by vomiting. Infants and adults often do not have the typical coughing fits or whoop.

How long is an infected person able to spread pertussis?

Without treatment, an infected person can spread the disease from the time he or she starts coughing up to three weeks after the start of the cough. After five days of treatment with an appropriate antibiotic, an infected person cannot spread the disease.

Can a person get pertussis again?

Usually, once a person has had pertussis, he or she would be protected against another pertussis infection. However, sometimes a person may get pertussis a second time especially if many years have passed.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

Treatment with antibiotics, erythromycin, azithromycin, clarithromycin, or trimethoprim/sulfa-methoxazole, may alter the course of disease if given early in the illness. Supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation may help a child during the prolonged period of severe coughing.

Should people who have been around a person with pertussis be treated?

All household and other close contacts of persons with pertussis, regardless of age, should receive an antibiotic to prevent the transmission of pertussis. All close contacts under seven years of age who have not had four doses of DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus and acellular pertussis) should receive the vaccine on time and other children may need a booster dose.

How can pertussis be prevented?

The main way that pertussis is prevented is by receiving DTaP vaccination (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis). The shot series starts with the first dose at two months of age and ends with a booster dose given before age seven with a total of five doses. After the series is complete, DTaP vaccination is 80% to 88% effective against pertussis infection.

Although DTaP vaccine usually provides adequate protection against pertussis, the effects of the vaccine wear off over time, leaving most teens and adults at risk of the disease. The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recently recommended that adolescents 11 and 12 years of age should receive a newly-approved tetanus, diphtheria, and five-component pertussis vaccine (Tdap) in place of the tetanus-diphtheria (Td) booster. ACIP also recommends that adolescents 13 through 18 years old who missed the 11 to 12 year dose should receive a dose of Tdap, and adolescents 11 to 18 years old who have already been vaccinated with Td are encouraged to receive a dose of Tdap to provide further protection against pertussis.

Antibiotics are given to patients to help prevent further illness and decrease infectiousness. After five days of treatment, a patient is no longer contagious.

Good hygiene habits prevent and reduce the transmission of pertussis and other respiratory infections including:

- covering your mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when sneezing or coughing
- disposing of tissues properly
- washing hands frequently
- using alcohol-based hand sanitizers if hands are not visibly soiled.

Does the pertussis vaccine cause reactions?

The risk of DTaP causing serious harm is extremely small. However, a vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. Up to 25% of children experience mild symptoms including : fever, redness, or soreness /tenderness where the shot was given. These problems occur more often after the 4th and 5th doses of the DTaP series than after earlier doses. Sometimes the 4th or 5th dose of DTaP vaccine is followed by swelling of the entire arm or leg in which the shot was given, lasting one to seven days. Very rarely (one out of one million doses), children experience severe allergic reactions.

Where can children receive pertussis vaccine?

All county health departments in Oklahoma administer the DTaP and Tdap vaccine. Also, you may speak with your local health care provider.

