
Pertussis or Whooping Cough

What is pertussis?

Pertussis is also called whooping cough. It is a serious lung infection caused by bacteria. It is also very contagious and causes coughing fits. Whooping cough is most serious for babies with very small airways. It can lead to death.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear about 7 to 10 days after exposure. But symptoms can appear from 4 to 21 days after a person is infected. It is rare but it can take up to 6 weeks to develop symptoms. Some people have milder symptoms, especially if they have been vaccinated.

Symptoms appear in 3 stages:

- Stage one lasts 1-2 weeks: runny nose, sneezing, low-grade fever, mild occasional cough. It may look like the common cold but the cough begins to get worse.
- Stage two can last 1-2 months: Cough becomes more severe. There are coughing fits that can be followed by a high-pitched whoop. The whoop means the person is trying to catch their breath. Sometimes a person will turn blue and vomit mucus or food. They also may have brief periods when they stop breathing.
- Stage three may last weeks to months: Recovery phase is when a person slowly gets better. Coughing fits can come back if the person gets another respiratory illness.

What are the complications of whooping cough?

Complications of whooping cough are more common in infants and young children. They may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, sleep disturbance, fainting, dehydration, seizures, altered brain function (encephalopathy), brief periods when breathing stops and death.

How long is a person with whooping cough contagious?

A person with whooping cough can pass it to others as soon as they get cold-like symptoms. They can also pass it up to 3 weeks after they start coughing. If the infected person takes an appropriate antibiotic, they will not spread the germ after 5 full days of treatment.

What is the treatment?

Antibiotics can prevent and treat whooping cough. Recommended antibiotics include azithromycin, erythromycin and clarithromycin. Trimethoprim sulfamethoxazole can also be used.

If my child or another family member has been exposed to whooping cough, what should I do?

Call your local health department, doctor or clinic for advice. If you have close contact with an infected person, you will be given the same medicines used to treat whooping cough. This will help prevent you and others from getting sick.

What is the best way to prevent whooping cough?

The best way to prevent whooping cough is to get vaccinated.

We recommend that all children and adults get a pertussis-containing vaccine.

- The recommended pertussis vaccine for infants and children is called DTaP. This protects children against 3 diseases: diphtheria, tetanus, and whooping cough (pertussis).

- DTaP shots are given at 2, 4, and 6 months of age. To maintain protection, boosters are also given at 15 through 18 months and 4 through 6 years of age.
- 7- to 10-year-olds who are not fully immunized with DTaP, should get a Tdap vaccine which protects against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough (pertussis).
- Preteens going to the doctor for their regular checkup at 11 or 12 years of age should get a booster dose of Tdap. If a preteen did not get this Tdap at 11 to 12 years, they should be vaccinated at their next doctor visit.
- All adults 19 and older who have not received a Tdap vaccine, need a booster shot.
- Adults should receive a tetanus and diphtheria (Td) booster every 10 years. They should also substitute a Tdap vaccine for one of the boosters. The Tdap can be given earlier than the 10-year spacing.
- It is very important for adults to make sure they are up-to-date with their pertussis-containing vaccines if they spend any time with infants. This includes parents, grandparents, siblings, babysitters, relatives and friends.
- Pregnant women should receive Tdap in the third trimester of every pregnancy to pass immunity to their newborn until the baby is old enough to begin shots at 2 months of age.
- Travelers should be up-to-date with pertussis-containing vaccines before they travel. Whooping cough occurs everywhere in the world.
- Health care staff who have direct contact with patients should get a single dose of Tdap if they have not already received it.

What are the whooping cough vaccine requirements for school attendance?

- Prekindergarten (Day Care, Head Start, or Nursery): 4 doses (age-appropriate)
- Kindergarten through 5th grade: 5 doses, or 4 doses with the 4th dose at 4 years of age or older. Or, 3 doses if they start the series at 7 years of age or older
- Grades 6 through 12th grade: 3 doses
- Grades 6 to 12: one dose of Tdap (required for students enrolling in grades 6 to 12 who have not previously received Tdap at 7 years of age or older)

What should I do if I'm not sure I received whooping cough vaccine?

Check with your doctor. An adolescent or adult without documentation of having received a primary series of at least three doses of tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccines in their lifetime should receive this series. The first dose should be Tdap. The remaining two doses should be adult formulation Td.

What should I or my family do to prevent whooping cough if we travel out of the country?

Whooping cough is still common in the United States and in many other countries. Make sure that you and your children are fully vaccinated before traveling.

- Adults 19 or older should receive a single dose of Tdap vaccine. Confirm with your doctor that you have received the vaccine for pertussis.
- Infants, children and adolescents should be up-to-date with pertussis-containing vaccines as described above.

Travel and whooping cough:

wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/diseases/pertussis

Learn more about whooping cough:

www.cdc.gov/pertussis

For more information about vaccine-preventable diseases: www.health.ny.gov/prevention/immunization/