



Fact Sheet: Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis is a very contagious disease affecting the respiratory tract. It is caused by a type of bacteria. Pertussis is a vaccine preventable childhood disease, but teenagers and adults can also get sick from pertussis. Pertussis is also known as “whooping cough” due to the “whoop” sound made when the infected person tries to breathe after hard coughing and choking spells. Not every person with pertussis will make this sound.

What are the symptoms?

- Cold symptoms: fever, runny nose and cough. In 1-2 weeks the coughing episodes may be frequent, persistent and last longer.
- The person may appear and feel fairly healthy much of the time.
- During bouts of coughing, the lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air. Vomiting can occur with severe episodes.
- In children less than 1 year old, complications include pneumonia, convulsions, and, in rare cases, brain damage and death
- Cough can last 1 – 2 months or longer

Symptoms appear 7-10 days after exposure. Infants less than 5 months and adults often do not have the “whoop”.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is spread through airborne droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. The greatest risk of spread is during the early stage when the symptoms resemble a cold. Many infants who get pertussis are infected by older siblings or parents.

How is it treated?

- Call your doctor if you think you, or your children have been exposed.
- An antibiotic is usually prescribed for treatment.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid being dehydrated.
- Carefully cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing.
- Wash hands often using soap and water
- Stay away from others, especially infants and young children, until you have been on antibiotics for 5 days.

How is it prevented?

Vaccine is available that includes protection against pertussis. Children should get 5 doses of this vaccine (DTaP). They need their first dose at 2 months of age. Additional doses are given at 4 months, 6 months, between 12–18 months and 4–6 years of age. People age 11-64 should receive a dose of Tdap. Women should receive Tdap before becoming pregnant. Women who have not previously received Tdap should receive a dose of Tdap in the immediate postpartum period. No vaccine is 100% effective, so those who have been vaccinated may still get sick with pertussis.

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This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self –diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or 257-3612.

Visit our website at: www.gchd.us or the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at: www.cdc.gov

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