

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Fact Sheet

What is it?

Whooping cough—or pertussis—is a serious respiratory infection caused by the pertussis bacteria. Individuals of any age can get pertussis; however, it is most harmful for young babies and can be deadly.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Early symptoms of pertussis are similar to a cold, including:

- ⇒ Runny or stuffed-up nose
- ⇒ Mild cough
- ⇒ A pause in breathing (apnea)

Coughing can start 1 to 2 weeks after being exposed to the bacteria; after this time, infected individuals may develop more serious symptoms, such as:

- ⇒ Coughing very hard, over and over. These coughing fits may happen more at night.
- ⇒ Gasping for breath after a coughing fit, sometimes making a “whooping” sound. Babies may not cough or make this sound—they may gag or gasp instead.
- ⇒ Difficulty breathing, eating, drinking, or sleeping because of coughing fits.
- ⇒ Turning blue (while coughing) from lack of oxygen.
- ⇒ Vomiting after coughing fits.

Coughing fits can last up to 10 weeks, and can make the person’s next respiratory illness more severe.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis spreads easily through the air when an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezes. Almost everyone who is not immune will get sick if exposed to it. Some people infected with pertussis develop mild or no symptoms; however, they can still spread the disease.

After a person with pertussis has taken antibiotics for 5 days, he or she can no longer spread the disease to others, even though the cough may continue. Without antibiotic treatment, a person is no longer considered contagious after 3 weeks of cough.

How long should someone with pertussis stay home from child care, school or work?

Persons with pertussis should stay home from child care, school, or work until they have finished 5 days of antibiotics, unless they have already been coughing for 3 or more weeks.

How can pertussis be prevented?

- ⇒ **Get vaccinated.** In addition to routine childhood immunizations, a pertussis vaccine booster may also be recommended for some adolescents and adults. Vaccinated persons may still get pertussis disease, but will generally have a less severe illness.
- ⇒ **If exposed, talk to your doctor about antibiotics.** In close contacts to known pertussis cases, these antibiotics may prevent the development of pertussis illness or decrease its severity.

For more information, please contact your health care provider or visit the Center’s for Disease Control and Prevention webpage on Pertussis: <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/index.html>



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