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# Pertussis (Whooping Cough)



## *What You Need to Know*

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### What Is Pertussis?

Pertussis is a very contagious respiratory disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella Pertussis*. Commonly called whooping cough, it can cause severe, prolonged coughing. This bacterial infection is easily spread through coughs and sneezes. Five things you should know about pertussis include:

- Pertussis is very contagious.
- Pertussis can be severe and even deadly in infants.
- Anyone can get pertussis, but it is more severe in young children.
- Pertussis is commonly misdiagnosed and under-diagnosed.
- You can get pertussis more than once.

### Who Needs To Be Vaccinated And When?

The pertussis vaccine includes vaccines against two other serious diseases — Diphtheria and Tetanus.

- The vaccine for young children is called DTaP. For maximum protection against pertussis, children need **five** DTaP shots:
  - The first three are given at two, four, and six months of age.
  - The fourth shot is given between 15 and 18 months of age
  - A fifth shot is given when a child enters school at four to six years of age.
- A booster vaccine is needed to remain immune against pertussis. A pertussis booster vaccine (Tdap) is recommended at 11-12 years of age. Adults need one Tdap booster in place of their next Tetanus (Td) booster (which is given every 10 years).
- Tdap is recommended for all family members and caregivers of infants at least two weeks before coming into close contact with the infant. Babies who get pertussis are often infected by parents, older siblings, or caregivers who might not even know they have the disease.
- Pregnant women need one dose of Tdap during the third trimester or late second trimester during each pregnancy. Receiving Tdap during pregnancy likely provides protection in early life, before the baby starts getting DTaP vaccines. Tdap is recommended before discharge from hospital or birthing center for new mothers not previously vaccinated or if vaccination status is unknown.
- If directly exposed to a person with pertussis, a doctor can give antibiotics to help prevent illness in addition to the vaccine.

### Why Are Infants At Such High Risk From Pertussis?

Every year in the United States about 15 to 20 children die from pertussis, most are young babies who cannot yet be fully immunized. It takes five shots, given per the schedule above to be fully immunized, so infants 6 months or younger are at greater risk of getting pertussis. With their small airways and the amount of mucus caused by pertussis, babies have trouble breathing.

### How Is Pertussis Spread?

People infected with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. Pertussis is most contagious during the first two weeks of illness.

## What Are The Symptoms Of Pertussis?

Symptoms are usually mild at first and similar to the common cold. After exposure it can take one to three weeks for signs and symptoms to first appear:

- Runny nose
- Nasal congestion
- Sneezing
- Red, watery eyes
- Mild fever
- Dry cough

One to two weeks later, coughing worsens, but cold-like symptoms improve. The person may not appear ill between coughing attacks. At this stage, thick mucus accumulates inside airways, causing uncontrollable coughing. Severe and prolonged coughing attacks may:

- Provoke vomiting
- Result in a red or blue face
- Cause extreme fatigue
- End with a high-pitched "whoop" sound during the next breath of air

Many people do not develop the characteristic whoop. Sometimes, a persistent, hacking cough is the only sign that an adolescent or adult has whooping cough.

## How Can Pertussis Be Prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis is to get vaccinated.

### Always Practice Healthy Habits:

- Cover mouth and nose with a tissue when sneezing or coughing, or turn away when coughing.
- Immediately throw away used tissues, followed by careful hand washing.
- Avoid sharing objects if they have been in the mouth (pacifiers, toys, silverware, etc.); wash objects in hot, soapy water between use.
- Wash your hands with soap and water after coughing, sneezing, or touching common surfaces like door knobs, keyboards, and telephones. You can also use alcohol-based hand cleaners.
- Since this is a respiratory illness, persons who have pertussis should wear a mask if they must be around other people.



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