

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)- Factsheet

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory disease. It is caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*.

What are the symptoms of pertussis infection?

Symptoms usually appear 4 to 21 days after exposure to someone with the illness. The symptoms of pertussis occur in three stages.

- The **first stage** begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever, and cough. The cough may be mild at first but soon gets worse.
- The **second stage** includes uncontrolled coughing or coughing spasms followed by a whooping noise when the person breathes in air. During these severe coughing spells, a person may vomit, or their lips or face may look blue from a lack of oxygen. The person may appear well between coughing spells. This stage may last several weeks.
- The **third stage** is the last stage where the cough slowly begins to disappear. This stage may also last for several weeks.

How is pertussis spread?

The bacterium that causes pertussis is found in the nose and throat of infected people. These bacteria spread through the air in droplets produced when an infected person sneezes or coughs. People in the early stage of illness are the most contagious.

How long are people contagious?

After five days of the proper antibiotics, people are no longer contagious. If a person does not take antibiotics, s/he is contagious for 21 days after the onset of the coughing spasms.

Who gets pertussis?

Anyone can get pertussis, but vaccination lowers the risk. It most commonly occurs in very young children who have not been vaccinated. Older children and adults can also get pertussis, but it is usually not as severe as it is in young babies. A person who has had pertussis before can get it again.

What treatment is available for people with pertussis?

Antibiotics will shorten the length of time the person is contagious and the length of time the illness can be spread. If started in the early stage of the disease, antibiotics may make the illness less severe. However, even with the antibiotics, people may cough for many weeks.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work, or daycare?

People sick with a cough should be kept home until they have been treated with antibiotics for at least five days and are well enough to return to school, work, or daycare.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting pertussis?

- If you are a household member or high-risk close contact of a person with pertussis, take the proper preventive antibiotics.
- Keep up to date on vaccinations. Pertussis-containing vaccine is given at ages 2, 4, and 6 months, with boosters at 15-18 months of age and at 4-6 years of age. Persons 11-18 years of age should receive a single booster dose of pertussis vaccine, preferably at 11-12 years of age. All adults should get a Tdap booster if they haven't had one before.
- Pregnant women need a Tdap during each pregnancy, to help protect the baby in its first months of life.
- Keep infants away from people who are sick. Cover your cough and wash your hands frequently if you are coughing or sneezing. See your healthcare provider right away if you develop symptoms.