



Countywide Services Agency

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Health and Human Services

Division of Public Health

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Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

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What is it?

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) is a highly contagious bacterial infection that causes coughing and gagging with little or no fever. An infected person has coughing episodes that may end in vomiting or cause a “whoop” sound when the person tries to breathe in.

Symptoms

- ❖ Symptoms appear between 6 to 21 days (average 7-10) after exposure to a person who has pertussis.
- ❖ The disease starts with cold symptoms: runny nose, sore throat and cough. Sometime in the first 2 weeks, severe coughing spells develop that can last up to 10 weeks. The person may look and feel fairly well between these coughing episodes.
- ❖ During bouts of cough, the lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air. Vomiting may occur after severe coughing spells.
- ❖ Coughing becomes worse at night when lying flat and causes sleep loss.
- ❖ Immunized school children and adults have milder symptoms than very young children do.

Complications can occur

- ❖ Pertussis is most dangerous to children less than 1-year of age. Complications for infants include pneumonia, convulsions, and in rare cases, brain damage or death.
- ❖ Serious complications are less likely in older children and adults.

How is it spread?

- ❖ Pertussis is spread through direct or indirect contact with respiratory droplets that enter the air when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.
- ❖ Spread can occur in the early stage when symptoms appear as a cold or later when the infected person begins to cough.
- ❖ Those treated with one of the recommended antibiotics are contagious until the first 5 days of antibiotic treatment have been completed. The total duration of treatment depends on the antibiotic prescribed.

Who gets it?

- ❖ Anyone who is exposed to the bacteria can get Pertussis.
- ❖ Unimmunized or inadequately immunized people are at higher risk for severe disease.
- ❖ Protection from the vaccine lasts approximately 10 years, therefore, middle school and high school age children and adults of all ages are susceptible, since for most people the last whooping cough vaccine is given prior to entrance to Kindergarten.

Treatment

- ❖ The vaccination against pertussis is included in the DTP or DTaP vaccines. Before age 7, children should get 5 doses of the vaccine. These are usually given at 2, 4, 6, and 15-18 months of age and 4-6 years of age. Recently the vaccine against pertussis was approved for people up to age 64. Ask your doctor about receiving a pertussis vaccine if you are over the age of 11.
- ❖ Persons with pertussis should avoid contact with others until no longer contagious (a person is no longer contagious after 21 days of coughing without antibiotic treatment or after 5 days of antibiotic treatment).

The full course of antibiotic treatment must be completed!