

Pertussis Fact Sheet

(Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis (whooping cough)? Pertussis is a respiratory disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. The disease can be very serious in infants (less than 1 year old) where it can lead to pneumonia and, less often, seizures or inflammation of the brain. In rare cases (1 out of 200), pertussis can result in death (especially in children less than 1 year of age).

Who gets pertussis? Pertussis affects people all over the world and can occur at any age. It is most commonly found in young children but can also occur in older children and adults, where it usually causes a milder illness that is often not diagnosed. Young children can get the disease from an older brother or sister or an adult with the mild form of the disease.

How is pertussis spread? The bacteria that causes pertussis is found in the nasopharyngeal region of the nose in infected people. The bacteria are spread through the air in droplets produced during sneezing and/or coughing. Persons in the early stage of illness are the most contagious. Antibiotics will shorten the length of time the illness can be spread. Children with pertussis who are in day care should be kept out of day care until they have been treated with antibiotics for at least 5 days or longer and are medically well enough to return.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear? The appearance of symptoms is usually 6 to 20 days after exposure. If a person is exposed to pertussis, certain antibiotics may help prevent or lessen the disease.

What are the symptoms of pertussis? The symptoms of pertussis usually occur in stages. The first stage begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, low grade fever and cough. The cough lasts one to two weeks and then becomes worse. The second stage of pertussis includes uncontrolled coughing spells followed by a whooping noise when a person breaths in air. During these severe coughing spells, a person may vomit, or their lips or face may look blue from a lack of oxygen. Between coughing spells a person may appear well. This stage may last four to six weeks. The last stage is the recovery stage where the symptoms begin to disappear.

How is pertussis diagnosed? A physician may suspect pertussis when someone has the symptoms described above. To confirm the diagnosis, a culture must be done where a swab of the back of the nose, taken during the early stage of the illness, is tested for growth of the *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria.

What is the treatment for pertussis? Certain antibiotics may make the illness less severe if started in the early stage of the disease but infants younger than 6 months of age and persons with severe cases may need to be hospitalized. Severe cases may require oxygen and mild sedation to help control the coughing spells.

How can pertussis be prevented? Pertussis can be prevented by immunizing children in early infancy. Pertussis vaccine is given at 2, 4, 6, and 15 months of age, and again when a child enters school. At least 4 doses are necessary to protect a child from pertussis.

Household members and close contacts (such as other children in day care settings) of a person with pertussis should be treated with antibiotics, whether or not they have been immunized. If started early enough, this should either prevent illness or make it less severe. Close contacts less than 7 years old who are either not immunized or who have received fewer than four doses of the pertussis vaccine should begin the immunization process immediately. Children who develop respiratory symptoms within 20 days of exposure should see a physician immediately and be tested for pertussis.