

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

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What is Pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious bacterial infection of the respiratory system that can cause episodes of severe coughing. Children suffering from whooping cough often develop coughing fits, especially at night, giving a high-pitched “whoop” sound which indicates the person is struggling to breathe between coughs. The disease can be a very serious disease, especially for infants less than one year of age.

Symptoms of pertussis

Pertussis symptoms have two stages.

- The first stage lasts 1-2 weeks. Early symptoms are like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever, and cough which slowly gets worse.
- The second stage is marked by uncontrolled coughing spells and a whooping noise in young children when the person inhales. During severe coughing spells, a person may vomit or become blue in the face from lack of air. Between coughing spells, the person often appears to be well. The coughing stage may last for 6 or more weeks.

Adults, teens and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that mimic bronchitis or asthma. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in very young infants, teens and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough.

How does pertussis spread?

Pertussis is usually spread through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period can average 4-21 days, most commonly seen in 7- 10 days.

Diagnosis of pertussis

A sample of mucus must be taken from the back of the nose and throat for testing. This sample is then tested by a laboratory to determine whether someone has pertussis.

Treatment of pertussis

- Antibiotics can make the disease milder if they are started early enough and will help to prevent spreading the illness to others.
- It is helpful to get plenty of rest and fluids.
- Making sure that children receive all their shots on time is the best way to control this disease in the future.

When and for how long can a person spread pertussis?

A person can spread pertussis from the time symptoms start until 3 weeks after the start of the coughing episodes. The use of appropriate antibiotics shortens this time frame to 5 days after treatment begins.

Preventing the spread of pertussis

- Immunization is the best way to prevent pertussis.
- Children should receive four doses of DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis) vaccine by 15 months of age and an additional dose of DTaP before they start school.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that adolescents ages 11-18 receive a single booster dose of the tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis vaccination (Tdap).
- The CDC also recommends that adults aged 19-64 receive one tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis booster dose (Tdap) as well.

If parents are not sure their children are completely immunized, they should contact their family doctor or the Allen County Health Department.

These every day actions help to prevent illness:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hands cleaners are also effective.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.
- **Stay home if you are sick.**

See also [Pertussis FAQs](#)

More information is available on the Health Department website, www.allencountyhealthdepartment.org and information can also be found on the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Pertussis/>