

Pertussis

Whooping Cough



What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious disease involving the respiratory tract. It is caused by pertussis bacteria that can be found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. Approximately 100 to 500 cases are reported each year in Washington State.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Severe illness is more common in young children who have not been immunized. Older immunized children or adults with pertussis have milder symptoms.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is primarily spread when infected people cough or sneeze, expelling droplets that contain *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria. Older siblings or adults who may not have symptoms or who may have mild symptoms can infect other people, especially infants. Therefore, a person with a cough that lasts more than a week without improvement should see a health care provider to ensure the cough is not pertussis.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially, symptoms resemble those of a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever (oral temp <100.4 °F) and a mild cough.

Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of many rapid coughs followed by a gasping for air with a high-pitched “whoop.” Patients may cough up thick mucus. These episodes may recur for one to two months and are more frequent at night.

Young children who have not been immunized have the most severe symptoms. Infants less than 6 months old, adolescents and adults often don't have the characteristic whoop.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The time between exposure and illness is usually 7 to 10 days, but may be as short as four days and as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

A person is contagious from when they first notice cold-like symptoms to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. Treatment of cases with antibiotics, such as erythromycin, can shorten the contagious period to 5 days, but it will not shorten the length of time a person continues to cough afterwards, sometimes for as long as two months.

Does the infection of pertussis make a person immune?

A pertussis infection usually provides immunity for many years, but immunity is usually not life-long.

What are the complications associated with pertussis?

Complications of pertussis may include:

- Pneumonia
- Middle ear infection
- Loss of appetite
- Dehydration
- Seizures
- Encephalopathy (disorders of the brain)
- Apneic episodes (brief cessation of breathing)
- Death (80% of deaths from pertussis occur in children under one year of age)

Are there vaccines for pertussis?

Yes. The childhood vaccine for pertussis, DTaP, is given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. Five doses are recommended: at 2, 4, 6, and 12-18 months of age, and a fifth dose between ages 4 and 6 or by grade school entry.

One-time boosters (Tdap) are available for people ages 10 to 64. Children, ages 7 to 9, who are not up to date or have never been vaccinated must wait until they are at least 10 to be vaccinated.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

- The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community.
- Anyone who comes into close contact with a person who has pertussis should receive antibiotics to prevent infection and spread of the disease.
- People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from young children and infants, as well as others, until day six after starting their antibiotics.

For more information:

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