

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Factsheet

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis is a disease caused by bacteria. It causes severe spells of coughing. These spells can interfere with eating, drinking and breathing. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, convulsions, inflammation of the brain (encephalitis), and sometimes death.

Who can get pertussis?

Pertussis can occur in all ages. It is most common in infants less than one year of age, but anyone can get it. 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 is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread through the air after an infected person coughs or sneezes. Other people then breathe in infected droplets.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts like a cold with symptoms of runny nose and an irritating cough. Within one to two weeks the cough develops into coughing fits. The fits are a series of violent coughs during which the victim struggles for breath. A gasping for air, which produces a high-pitched whooping sound, follows the coughing. The coughing fits occur more frequently at night and are often followed by vomiting. Between spells, the person often appears to be well. Adults, teens, and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that look like bronchitis.

How long is an infected person able to spread pertussis?

Without treatment, an infected person can spread the disease from the time he or she starts coughing up to three weeks after the start of the coughing fits. After five days of treatment with the antibiotic, erythromycin, an infected person cannot spread the disease.

Can a person get pertussis again?

One attack usually provides immunity for a long time, but second attacks occasionally occur.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may think a patient has pertussis because of the symptoms, but a sample of mucus must be taken from the back of the nose for testing. This sample is then sent for testing to determine whether the patient has pertussis.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

Treatment with erythromycin may alter the course of pertussis if given early in the illness. Supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation may help the child during the prolonged period of severe coughing.

Should people who have been around a person with pertussis be treated?

All household and other close contacts of persons with pertussis, regardless of age, should receive an antibiotic to prevent the spread of pertussis. All close contacts under seven years of age who have not had four doses of diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine should receive the vaccine on time and other children may need a booster dose.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Pertussis can usually be prevented by 5 injections of combined diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine beginning at 2 months of age. Most children who receive five doses of vaccine are protected, but the protection wears off after a number of years. The disease is milder in those who do become ill with pertussis. The vaccine is not given to people over seven years of age.

Does the pertussis vaccine cause reactions?

With vaccine some children may have mild fever and be cranky for up to two days after getting the shot. Some may also develop soreness and swelling in the area where the shot was given. Rarely more serious side effects can occur, such as high fever, continuous crying, convulsions, and inflammation of the brain (encephalitis). Both convulsions and encephalitis are seen more frequently following pertussis disease than following vaccine.

Where can children receive pertussis vaccine?

All county health departments in Iowa administer the vaccine. You may also check with your private doctor.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor or nurse
- Your local health department (listed in the telephone book under local government)
- Iowa Department of Public Health, Bureau of Immunization, 1-800-831-6293