

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Information Sheet

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis is a highly contagious bacterial disease that affects the respiratory tract.

What are the symptoms?

In infants and young children, the disease begins much like a cold with a runny nose, possible low-grade fever and a mild but irritating cough for 1 to 2 weeks. The illness progresses to spells of explosive coughing that can interrupt breathing, eating and sleeping and is commonly followed by vomiting and exhaustion. Following the cough, the patients may make a loud crowing or “whooping” sound as they struggle to inhale air (hence the common name “whooping cough”). The severe coughing spells can last from several weeks to two months or longer. In older children, adolescents and adults, the symptoms are usually milder and without the typical whoop.

Whooping cough is particularly severe in the first year of life and may require hospitalization. Some older children and adults have few to no symptoms. Duration is usually 6 to 10 weeks.

How does it spread?

Pertussis is a very contagious disease. It is caused by a germ that lives in the mouth, nose and throat. It is spread to others through coughing or sneezing by an infected person. The infectious period is from the onset of illness until 3 weeks after the cough starts, with risk diminishing rapidly. The incubation period is usually from 7 to 10 days and rarely exceeds 2 weeks after contact with someone who has it.

What to do:

If your child (or yourself) has been diagnosed with whooping cough:

- Stay away from school/workplace/daycare and avoid contact with others for at least 5 days after antibiotic is started. Full antibiotic treatment is for 14 days. Erythromycin is the drug of choice.
- If not on an antibiotic, stay at home for 3 weeks from onset of disease.
- Notify all people that the infectious person has had contact with, especially parents of babies and young children.

What to do if your child had contact with an infectious person:

- Check immunization records to be sure your child has been immunized for Pertussis. Children do **not** receive Pertussis immunization if they are age 7 or older.
- Close contacts (living in the same household / attending the same daycare / sharing the same airspace for extended periods) may be advised to take a 14-day course of antibiotics to protect them from this disease.
- Watch for signs of whooping cough.

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