

Whooping Cough

(Pertussis)
Fact Sheet



What is Whooping Cough?

- Pertussis (whooping cough) is highly contagious and one of the most commonly occurring vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States.

How is Whooping Cough spread?

- People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria.
- Many infants who get pertussis are infected by older siblings, parents or other caregivers who might not even know they have the disease.

What are the symptoms of Whooping Cough?

- Pertussis symptoms can be different depending on how old you are or if you've been vaccinated.
- Pertussis usually starts with cold-like symptoms, and maybe mild cough, but not every runny nose is pertussis. Pertussis is often not suspected or diagnosed until a persistent cough with spasms sets in after 1–2 weeks.
- In infants, the cough may be mild or absent. However, infants may have a symptom known as "apnea." Apnea is a brief pause in the child's breathing pattern.
- Infants and children with pertussis can cough violently and rapidly, over and over, until the air is gone from their lungs and they're forced to inhale with a loud "whooping" sound. This extreme coughing can result in vomiting and exhaustion. Illness is generally less severe in adolescents and adults.
- The coughing fits usually last from 1 to 6 weeks, but can go on for up to 10 weeks or more.
- Although children are often exhausted after a coughing fit, they usually appear relatively healthy in-between coughing episodes.
- The illness can be milder (less severe) and the typical "whoop" absent in children, adolescents, and adults who have been vaccinated.

How can I reduce the risk of getting Whooping Cough?

- Everyone should make sure they are up to date with recommended pertussis vaccines (**DTaP** for infants/children and **Tdap** for adolescents/adults). If not sure, call your doctor to see what's best for you and your family.
 - No serious reactions have been associated with DTaP or Tdap and getting these vaccines is much safer than getting the dangerous kinds of diseases they prevent.
- Infants and children are recommended to receive the childhood pertussis vaccine, or DTaP, at 2, 4, and 6 months of age. A fourth shot is given between 15 and 18 months of age, and a fifth shot is given when a child enters school, at 4–6 years of age.
 - To maximize protection, all 5 doses of DTaP are needed on time according to the recommended immunization schedule.

- Many infants who get pertussis are infected by older siblings, parents, or other caregivers who might not even know they have the disease. If you are planning on becoming pregnant or are currently pregnant, talk to your doctor about getting the Tdap vaccine. Don't risk spreading this disease to your baby. Make sure all people around your baby are vaccinated with Tdap including siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nannies, caregivers, childcare staff, etc.
- Keep young infants away from people with cough illness. Likewise, people with cough illness should always stay away from young infants.

What about a Vaccine for Whooping Cough?

- Everyone should make sure they are up to date with recommended pertussis vaccines (**DTaP** for infants/children and **Tdap** for adolescents/adults). If not sure, call your doctor to see what's best for you and your family.
 - No serious reactions have been associated with DTaP or Tdap and getting these vaccines is much safer than getting the dangerous kinds of diseases they prevent.
- Since 2005, there has been an adolescent/adult pertussis booster vaccine (Tdap) that can be used for prevention and control of pertussis.
 - The protection received from DTaP, the childhood vaccine, fades over time. Adolescents and adults need Tdap, even if they were completely vaccinated with DTaP as children.
 - Pre-teens going to the doctor for their regular check-up at age 11 or 12 years should get a dose of Tdap.
 - Adults 19-64 years old who didn't get Tdap as a pre-teen or teen should get one dose of Tdap instead of their next Td booster.
 - The dose of Tdap can be given earlier than the 10-year mark since the last Td booster, so it's a good idea for adults to talk to a healthcare provider about what's best for their specific situation.
 - Getting vaccinated with Tdap is especially important for family members with and caregivers of new infants.
- If pertussis is circulating in the community, there is still a chance that a fully vaccinated person (of any age) can catch this very contagious disease. This is because no vaccine is 100% effective. However, when a vaccinated person gets pertussis, the infection is usually less severe.
- Even with the success of pertussis vaccines, people continue to get pertussis in the US.
 - Since the 1980s, there's been an increase in the number of reported cases of pertussis, especially among teens (10–19 years of age) and babies younger than 6 months of age.
 - Multiple factors have likely contributed to the increase, including waning immunity from childhood pertussis vaccines, increased recognition, better diagnostic testing and increased reporting.
 - In 2008 there were more than 13,000 reported cases including 18 deaths from pertussis nationally.
 - Most deaths occur in babies who are too young to be fully vaccinated.
 - In 2005, the last peak year, there were more than 25,000 reported cases of pertussis. But, many cases of pertussis are not recognized or reported so this is likely a substantial underestimate.

Diagnosis and Treatment

- Seeking treatment when pertussis symptoms first start is important.
 - If you or your child is having trouble breathing, seek medical attention immediately.
 - Tell the doctor if you or your child has been around others with cough/cold symptoms or if you've heard that pertussis is in your community.
 - Antibiotic treatment may make the pertussis infection less severe if it is started early, before coughing fits begin.
 - Antibiotic treatment can help prevent spreading the disease to close contacts (people who have spent a lot of time around the infected person) and is necessary for stopping the spread of pertussis.