

# FACT SHEET

# Pertussis

## What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a highly contagious respiratory disease (commonly called Whooping Cough) that is caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. It can cause violent coughing, making it hard to breathe, as well as other more serious complications such as pneumonia, seizures, and brain damage. Anyone at any age can get pertussis. Pertussis can be severe and even deadly, particularly in infants.

## How is it spread?

Pertussis is spread by direct contact with discharge from the respiratory tract of an infected person, or by breathing in droplets projected into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. An untreated person is most infectious during the early stages of the disease to about two weeks after the onset of the cough spasms. A person treated with an appropriate antibiotic is usually not infectious after a course of treatment.

## What are the symptoms?

After exposure, it takes 1-3 weeks for symptoms to appear.

- Symptoms begins with a mild cough, runny nose, red watery eyes, lack of appetite, and low-grade fever
- Coughing generally gets worse and can cause spasms. Some people make a high pitched “whoop” noise

while coughing and possibly vomit during the coughing spasm.

- Struggle to breathe

## How is it prevented?

Whooping cough can be prevented by vaccination with either DTaP or Tdap vaccines (depending on age). These vaccines also protect against tetanus and diphtheria. Preventative antibiotics may be prescribed if an infected person is in your household. Practice good hygiene like covering your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.

## How is it treated?

If you think you may have pertussis, contact your doctor for testing and possible antibiotic treatment. Antibiotics given during the early stage can reduce symptoms. Antibiotics given after the cough spasms have started have no effect on the course of the illness but are recommended to limit the spread of the disease to others. Limit group activities including work and school until you have received five days of an appropriate antibiotic. Infants younger than six months of age with severe disease often require hospitalization to manage cough spasms, feeding difficulties or other complications.

If you are a close contact to someone who has pertussis, you may be given a course of antibiotics to prevent the disease. If you are not up to date on your pertussis vaccine, it is recommended you get vaccinated.

*This fact sheet is for informational purposes only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*

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