

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis is an illness of the airways and lungs that spreads very easily. It is also known as whooping cough.

Who gets pertussis?

While most pertussis infections are seen in children less than five years of age, anyone can get sick with it.

Pertussis vaccines are effective, but not perfect. People who have been vaccinated against pertussis may still get infected, but usually have milder symptoms.

Many babies who get sick with pertussis are infected by older siblings, parents, or caregivers who do not know they have it.

How is it spread?

The germ that causes pertussis can be spread from person to person through the air when someone who has pertussis coughs or sneezes.

How serious is pertussis?

Pertussis can cause serious illness in people of all ages, but it is especially dangerous for infants and young children who are not fully vaccinated.

- About 1 in 3 babies younger than 1 year old who get whooping cough need care in the hospital, and 1 in 100 babies who get treatment in the hospital die.

When do symptoms begin?

Symptoms of pertussis usually start within 5 – 10 days after being around someone with the infection, but sometimes symptoms do not start until 3 weeks later.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms of pertussis usually include:

- Runny or stuffed-up nose
- Mild, occasional cough (babies do not have this symptom)
- Low-grade fever (less than 100.4 °F)
- Apnea (life-threatening pauses in breathing) and cyanosis (turning blue or purple) in babies and young children

After 1 - 2 weeks, violent, uncontrolled coughing fits may start. They usually last 1 – 6 weeks and can cause people to:

- Make a high-pitched “whoop” sound when they are finally able to inhale at the end of a coughing fit
- Vomit during or after coughing fits
- Feel very tired after the fit, but usually seem well between fits
- Struggle to breathe

Older children and adults, especially those who have been vaccinated, may have milder symptoms.

How do you prevent pertussis?

The best way to prevent pertussis is to get vaccinated.

- Babies and children younger than 7 years old should get the DTaP vaccine on the recommended vaccination schedule.
- Older children and adults should get the Tdap vaccine.
- Pregnant people should get the Tdap vaccine in the 3rd trimester of each pregnancy to help protect their babies.

Other ways to prevent the spread of pertussis:

- Cover nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

For more information

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