

FACT SHEET: PERTUSSIS

November 2023

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory tract infection caused by a bacterium (germ), *Bordetella pertussis* that is found in the nose, mouth and throat of an infected person.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Young children and infants may have a more severe illness, especially if they have not received at least three doses of pertussis vaccine.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The symptoms of pertussis are divided into 3 stages as follows:

- Catarrhal stage: onset of runny nose, sneezing, low-grade fever, and mild cold that lasts 1-2 weeks and worsens
- Paroxysmal stage: More severe cough, often leading to “fits” (paroxysms) of numerous, rapid coughs followed by a characteristic high-pitched whoop. They may become blue (cyanotic) during the attack. Children and young infants may appear very ill and distressed. Coughing episodes may cause vomiting. This stage lasts 1 to 6 weeks but may persist for up to 10 weeks.
- Convalescent stage: Gradual recovery which lasts weeks to a month.

What are the complications of pertussis?

Pertussis rarely causes severe complications among healthy people. The most severe complication, and the cause of most pertussis-related deaths is secondary bacterial pneumonia. Other less serious complications include middle ear infection, loss of appetite, encephalopathy, and seizures.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually 5 to 10 days but maybe as long as 21 days.

How does pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread from person to person by contact directly with respiratory droplets from the nose and throat of infected people. This frequently occurs when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. The infected person is contagious up to 3 weeks after symptoms start. Antibiotics shorten the contagious period to about five days.

When and how long is a person with pertussis contagious?

A person can be contagious from 7 days following exposure up to 3 weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. A person is no longer infectious once they have strictly completed a physician’s prescribed course of antibiotic therapy.

How long can a person have pertussis?

A person can have pertussis for as long as 3 months. Treatment with antibiotics prevents further spread of the disease but does not immediately resolve symptoms.

How is pertussis treated?

If started early, antibiotics may help reduce the severity of symptoms and prevent the spread of disease to others.

Should a person with pertussis be excluded from work or school?

Yes. It is recommended that an individual be excluded until they have completed a full 5-day course of antibiotics.

Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

Yes. The routine schedule is a primary series of 3 doses at 2, 4, and 6 months, followed by a booster dose given between 15 through 18 months of age, and an additional booster given between 4 through 6 years of age.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community. Treatment of cases, household contacts and other close contacts with antibiotics can prevent or reduce transmission. Close contacts younger than 7 years old who have not completed the vaccination series should also receive their next scheduled dose of vaccine at this time. Close contacts between the ages of 11 and 65 should receive a booster vaccine if they have not previously received it.

Want more information?

Information about pertussis and other related health topics can be found at the website [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (844) 493-2652.