

Whooping cough

Whooping cough, also called pertussis, is a serious respiratory infection caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. The infection causes violent, uncontrollable coughing that can make it difficult to breathe.

While whooping cough can affect people at any age, it can be deadly for infants and young children.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Trusted Source, before a vaccine was available, whooping cough was a major cause of childhood deaths in the United States. The CDC Trusted Source reports the total number of cases of pertussis in 2016 was just under 18,000, with 7 deaths reported.

Whooping cough symptoms

The incubation period (the time between initial infection and the onset of symptoms) for whooping cough is about 5 to 10 days, but symptoms might not appear for as long as three weeks, according to the CDC Trusted Source.

Early symptoms mimic the common cold and include a runny nose, cough, and fever. Within two weeks, a dry and persistent cough may develop that makes breathing very difficult.

Children often make a “whoop” sound when they try to take a breath after coughing spells, though this classic sound is less common in infants.

This type of severe cough can also cause:

- vomiting
- blue or purple skin around the mouth

- dehydration
- low-grade fever
- breathing difficulties

Adults and teenagers typically experience milder symptoms, such as a prolonged cough without the “whoop” sound.

Diagnosing and treating whooping cough

If you or your child experience symptoms of whooping cough, seek medical attention right away, especially if members of your family haven’t been immunized.

Whooping cough is highly contagious — bacteria can become airborne when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or laughs — and can quickly spread to others.

Diagnosis

To diagnose whooping cough, your doctor will perform a physical exam and take samples of mucus in the nose and throat. These samples will then be tested for the presence of the *B. pertussis* bacteria. A blood test may also be necessary to make an accurate diagnosis.

Treatment

Many infants and some young children will need to be hospitalized during treatment, for observation and respiratory support. Some may need intravenous (IV) fluids for dehydration if symptoms prevent them from drinking enough fluids.

Since whooping cough is a bacterial infection, antibiotics are the primary course of treatment. Antibiotics are most effective in the early stages of whooping cough. They can also be used in the late stages of the infection to prevent it from spreading to others.

While antibiotics can help treat the infection, they don't prevent or treat the cough itself.

However, cough medicines aren't recommended — they have no effect on whooping cough symptoms and may carry harmful side effects for infants and small children.

Most doctors suggest using humidifiers in your child's bedroom to keep air moist and help alleviate symptoms of whooping cough.

Possible complications

Infants with whooping cough require close monitoring to avoid potentially dangerous complications due to lack of oxygen. Serious complications include:

- brain damage
- pneumonia
- seizures
- bleeding in the brain
- apnea (slowed or stopped breathing)
- convulsions (uncontrollable, rapid shaking)
- death

If your infant experiences symptoms of infection, call your doctor immediately.

Older children and adults can experience complications as well, including:

- difficulty sleeping
- urinary incontinence (loss of bladder control)
- pneumonia
- rib fracture