



# Pertussis Fact Sheet

## **What is pertussis (whooping cough)?**

Pertussis is a contagious disease caused by bacteria. It causes severe spells of coughing which can interfere with eating, drinking, and breathing. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, convulsions (seizures), inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) and sometimes death. Some people who recover from pertussis may suffer from mental retardation.

## **Who can get pertussis?**

Pertussis can occur in all ages but is most common in children younger than 5 years, especially infants less than 1 year of age.

## **How is pertussis spread?**

Pertussis is spread through the air after an infected person coughs or sneezes. Other people then breathe in infected droplets.

## **What are the symptoms of pertussis?**

Pertussis starts like a cold with symptoms of runny nose and an irritating cough. Within 1 to 2 weeks the cough develops into coughing fits - a series of violent coughs during which the victim struggles for breath. The coughing is followed by a gasping for air which produces a high-pitched whooping sound. The coughing fits occur more frequently at night and are often followed by vomiting. Infants and adults often do not have the typical coughing fits or "whoop".

## **How long is an infected person able to spread pertussis?**

Without treatment an infected person can spread the disease from the time he or she starts coughing up to 3 weeks after the start of the coughing fits. After 5 days of treatment with the antibiotic, erythromycin, an infected person cannot spread the disease.

## **Can a person get pertussis again?**

One attack usually provides immunity for a long time, but second attacks occasionally occur.

## **What is the treatment for pertussis?**

Treatment with antibiotics may alter the course of pertussis if given early in the illness. Supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation may help the child during the prolonged period of severe coughing.

## **Should people who have been around a person with pertussis be treated?**

All household and other close contacts of persons with pertussis, regardless of age, should receive an antibiotic to prevent the transmission of pertussis. All close contacts under 7 years of age who have not had 4 doses of DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus and acellular pertussis) should receive the vaccine on time and other children may need a booster dose.

## **How can pertussis be prevented?**

Pertussis can usually be prevented by receiving 4 injections of combined DTaP vaccine beginning at 2 months of age. Approximately 80 percent of children who receive 4 doses of DTaP are protected and the disease is milder in those who do become ill with pertussis.

## **Does the pertussis vaccine cause reactions?**

With DTaP vaccine most children will have a slight fever and be cranky for up to 2 days after getting the shot. Some will develop some soreness and swelling in the area where the shot was given. Occasionally more serious side effects occur such as high fever and continuous crying, and rarely convulsions and inflammation of the brain (encephalitis). Both convulsions and encephalitis are seen more frequently following pertussis disease than following DTaP vaccine.

## **Where can children receive pertussis vaccine?**

Children can receive the DTaP vaccine at their doctor's office or at any county health department in Oklahoma.