



# Pertussis Fact Sheet

## What is Pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis is a contagious disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. It causes severe spells of coughing which can interfere with breathing. It is often milder in older children and in adults but can cause serious problems for infants. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, convulsions (seizures), inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) and sometimes death. Most of these serious problems occur in infants less than 1 year old.

## 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 because they are too young to have full protection from the Pertussis vaccine. Pertussis is more common in adolescents and adults who have lost the protection they got from vaccination or illness in childhood.

## How is Pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread through the air after an infected person coughs or sneezes. Other people then breathe in infected droplets. Although this is not common, germs can also be picked up by hands and spread through touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. People that spend long periods of time with an infected person (i.e. household members) are more likely to get Pertussis. In most cases, classmates, co-workers, and people in clinic waiting rooms are not at risk.

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Good hygiene habits prevent and reduce the transmission of Pertussis including: Covering your mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when sneezing or coughing, washing hands frequently, and using alcohol-based hand sanitizers if hands are not visibly soiled.

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

Symptoms of pertussis usually develop within 5 to 10 days after you are exposed. Pertussis starts like a cold with a runny nose, mild cough and fever. Within 1 to 2 weeks the mild cough develops into 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 may also stop breathing for short periods of time and become bluish around the mouth and nose.

### **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. Antibiotics may shorten the amount of time someone is contagious.

### **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

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fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation may help the child during the prolonged period of severe coughing.

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

Getting sick with pertussis doesn't provide lifelong protection. You can still get pertussis and pass it onto others.

### **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. Adults are also recommended to receive the adult vaccine (Tdap).

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

Approximately 80-90% of children who receive the full shot series are protected against future Pertussis infections. However, the effect of these vaccinations wear off over time, leaving teens and adults at risk. Pertussis can usually be prevented by receiving 5 doses of combined DTaP vaccine at: 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15-18 months, and 4-6 years old. Preteens should receive a Tdap booster shot at age 11 or 12 years. It is also

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important for women to get the whooping cough vaccine in the third trimester of each pregnancy (27-36<sup>th</sup> weeks).

### **Where can I receive Pertussis vaccine?**

You can receive the DTaP and Tdap vaccine at your doctor's office or at a county health department.

*For further information, contact the  
Oklahoma City-County Health  
Department (405) 425-4437*

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