

FACTS ABOUT PERTUSSIS (WHOOPIING COUGH)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a contagious illness that is spread when an infected person sneezes or coughs and another individual breathes in the bacteria.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. It may be very severe in infants and young children (especially those who have not had 3 doses of pertussis vaccine), resulting in hospitalization, seizures, long-term neurological problems, and even death. Pertussis can occur in immunized individuals, because the immunity gained from vaccination typically wanes over time. Although widespread use of pertussis vaccines has reduced the number of pertussis cases, this disease has been increasing in recent years.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Symptoms usually appear between 7 to 10 days after exposure to the bacteria, but can develop 4 to 21 days after exposure. The disease starts with cold-type symptoms: low-grade fever, runny nose and mild cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of fits of coughing. Vomiting, breathlessness, a change in facial color, and/or whooping sound may follow the coughing fits. In between coughing fits, the individual may look and feel fine. These coughing fits may continue for several months, and are more frequent at night.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread through droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. The first symptoms usually appear 7 to 10 days after exposure. The greatest risk of spread is during the early stages of the illness through the first three weeks of coughing. Those treated with antibiotics are considered contagious until they have completed 5 days of an appropriate antibiotic.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

A health care provider may prescribe an appropriate antibiotic such as azithromycin (Zithromax), clarithromycin, or erythromycin. These antibiotics will reduce the contagious period, but will not reduce the cough symptoms unless taken in the very early stage of the infection.

Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

The vaccine for pertussis is given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. Immunization authorities recommend that five doses of DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis) vaccine be given at two, four, six, 15 to 18 months of age, and between four and six years of age and a single dose of Tdap be administered at 11-64 years of age. Tdap vaccine was licensed in 2005 for use in adolescents and adults and is highly recommended for those who have close contact with infants.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

The most effective measure is to maintain the highest level of pertussis immunization in our community. Immunization records of children, adolescents, and adults should be reviewed to ensure they are up-to-date on their DTaP/Tdap shots. Persons not up to date with their pertussis shots should receive DTaP/Tdap vaccine as soon as possible. Persons with pertussis should avoid contact with others until they have taken 5 full days of an appropriate antibiotic. Close contacts of a case of pertussis should receive a course of an appropriate antibiotic to prevent pertussis.