

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a very contagious respiratory illness

Pertussis is caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. It can be found in the nose, throat, and mouth of an infected person and is easily spread to others.

Pertussis can occur at any age; however, babies younger than 1 year old are at greatest risk for getting pertussis and having severe complications from it.

Pertussis is spread from person to person by droplets in the air

Pertussis is very contagious. People who are infected spread pertussis by coughing or sneezing, which creates respiratory droplets that contain the bacteria. You can get sick if you breathe in those droplets. A person with pertussis may be contagious for several weeks after their symptoms begin if they aren't treated with antibiotics.

Signs and symptoms of pertussis

Symptoms usually begin 7 to 10 days after exposure, but may not appear for up to 21 days. Pertussis illness consists of three stages, and it typically takes 6 to 10 weeks for you to fully recover from pertussis. During the first stage of illness, which typically lasts a week or two, you have mild respiratory symptoms similar to the common cold, such as runny nose, sneezing, congestion, and mild cough. Fever might also be present.

The cough gradually becomes more severe and frequent, leading to the second stage of illness. This stage consists of paroxysmal coughing (bursts of rapid coughing), inspiratory "whoop", and vomiting after coughing. This second stage typically lasts 1 to 6 weeks.

The third stage of illness consists of a gradual recovery during which the cough becomes less severe and frequent, and typically disappears after an additional 2 to 3 weeks.

Pertussis can cause severe illness and complications

Babies younger than 1 year old are at greatest risk for getting pertussis and having severe complications from it. Other people who are at increased risk for severe illness include:

- Children who are unvaccinated or not up to date on pertussis vaccine
- People with weakened immune systems
- People with moderate to severe medically treated asthma

Complications of pertussis can include pneumonia (infection of the lungs), encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), seizures, and other physical and medical outcomes associated with a severe cough.

Talk to your healthcare provider if you think you have pertussis or were exposed to someone with pertussis

Pertussis can be difficult to diagnose by symptoms alone, especially in the early stages, when the illness resembles the common cold. Your healthcare provider can order tests to determine if you have pertussis, and can prescribe antibiotics to relieve symptoms and lower the risk of spreading the disease to others.

If you were exposed to someone with pertussis, even if you don't have symptoms, you might be prescribed antibiotics to prevent you from becoming ill.

People with pertussis and people who were exposed to someone with pertussis should not attend childcare, school, work, or other public places until they have completed the first 5 days of an appropriate antibiotic treatment.

Vaccination is the best way to protect yourself from pertussis

Every child should get the pertussis vaccine at 2, 4, 6, and 15 to 18 months of age, and another dose at 4 to 6 years of age. Pertussis vaccine is also recommended for adolescents ages 11 to 18, pregnant women, healthcare workers, and adults in close contact with infants.