

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is whooping cough?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory disease. It is caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*.

Pertussis is known for uncontrollable, violent coughing which often makes it hard to breathe. After cough fits, someone with pertussis often needs to take deep breaths, which result in a “whooping” sound. Pertussis can affect people of all ages, but can be very serious, even deadly, for babies less than a year old.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

Early symptoms can last 1 to 2 weeks and include:

- Runny nose
- Low-grade fever
- Mild, occasional cough
- A pause in breathing in infants (apnea)

After 1 to 2 weeks and as the disease progresses, the traditional symptoms of pertussis may appear and include:

- Paroxysms (fits) of many, rapid coughs followed by a high-pitched “whoop” sound
- Vomiting (throwing up) during or after coughing fits
- Exhaustion (very tired) after coughing fits

How serious is whooping cough?

Pertussis can cause serious illness in people of all ages and can even be life-threatening, especially in babies. Approximately half of babies less than 1 year old who get pertussis need treatment in the hospital.

How does whooping cough spread?

Pertussis is a very contagious disease only found in humans. Pertussis spreads from person to person. People with pertussis usually spread the disease to another person by coughing or sneezing or when spending a lot of time near one another where you share breathing space. Many babies who get pertussis are infected by older siblings, parents, or caregivers who might not even know they have the disease. Infected people are most contagious up to about 2 weeks after the cough begins. Antibiotics may shorten the amount of time someone is contagious.

How is whooping cough diagnosed?

Healthcare providers diagnose pertussis (whooping cough) by considering if you have been exposed to pertussis and by doing a:

- History of typical signs and symptoms
- Physical examination
- Laboratory test which involves taking a sample of mucus (with a swab or syringe filled with saline) from the back of the throat through the nose
- Blood test

How is whooping cough treated?

Healthcare providers generally treat pertussis with antibiotics and early treatment is very important. Treatment may make your infection less serious if you start it early, before coughing fits begin. Treatment can also help prevent spreading the disease to close contacts (people who have spent a lot of time around the infected person). Treatment after three weeks of illness is unlikely to help. The bacteria are gone from your body by then, even though you usually will still have symptoms. This is because the bacteria have already done damage to your body.

There are several antibiotics (medications that can help treat diseases caused by bacteria) available to treat pertussis. If a healthcare professional diagnoses you or your child with pertussis, they will explain how to treat the infection. Pertussis can sometimes be very serious, requiring treatment in the hospital. Babies are at greatest risk for serious complications from pertussis.

What is the DTaP vaccine?

The DTaP vaccine is a shot that combines the vaccines for whooping cough (pertussis) and two other serious diseases: diphtheria and tetanus. The DTaP vaccine protects children by preparing their bodies to fight the bacteria.

Most children, about 80% to 90% who get all doses of the DTaP vaccine will be protected from whooping cough. Protection from the DTaP vaccine decreases over time. Some children who are vaccinated do get the disease.

Should my child get the DTaP vaccine?

Getting your child the DTaP vaccine helps protect him against whooping cough. It also protects other people who can't get the vaccine—especially newborn babies, who can get very sick and die from whooping cough.

When should my child get the DTaP vaccine?

Children should get five doses of the DTaP vaccine at the following ages for best protection:

- One dose each at 2 months, 4 months, and 6 months;
- A fourth dose at 15 through 18 months; and
- A fifth dose at 4 through 6 years of age.

It is safe to get the DTaP vaccine at the same time as other vaccines, even for babies.

Is the DTaP vaccine safe?

The DTaP vaccine is very safe, and it is effective at preventing whooping cough (and two other diseases: diphtheria and tetanus). Vaccines are like medicines, and any medicine can have side effects. but severe side effects from the DTaP vaccine are very rare.

If I've had whooping cough, do I still need a pertussis booster?

Yes. Getting sick with pertussis or getting pertussis vaccines doesn't provide lifelong protection. This means you can still get pertussis and pass it onto others, including babies.

For more information:

Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/about/index.html> or call Huron County Public Health at 419-668-1652 ext. 269.