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What is whooping cough (pertussis)?

Whooping cough, also known as pertussis, is a very contagious respiratory illness caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. It is known for causing a severe cough that has the “whoop” noise when someone gasps for air after a coughing fit. Whooping cough is one of the most common vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States. The disease can be very serious in children less than one year of age. It can cause lung infections and, less often, seizures or inflammation of the brain. In rare cases, pertussis can result in death in children less than one year of age.

Who gets whooping cough?

Whooping cough can occur at any age, but vaccination reduces the risk. It most commonly occurs in very young children who have not been vaccinated. Whooping cough in older children and adults often causes milder illness that may not be diagnosed.

Can a person who had whooping cough get it again?

Yes. Protection from both vaccination or previous disease wanes with time (typically 5-10 years), so it is possible to get whooping cough again.

How is whooping cough spread?

The bacteria that causes whooping cough can spread through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These bacteria can spread easily from person to person when people spend a lot of time together or share breathing space. Older children and adults can spread whooping cough to infants they have close contact with.

When and for how long is someone able to spread the disease?

People can spread the bacteria from the start of symptoms and for up to 3 weeks after coughing begins. Antibiotics shorten the length of time an infected person is contagious. Children should be kept out of childcare or school until they have been treated with antibiotics for at least five days and are well enough to return. Adults with pertussis should stay home from work until they have been treated with antibiotics for at least five days.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

The symptoms of whooping cough occur in stages. The first stage begins like a cold with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever, and cough. The cough lasts 1-2 weeks and then worsens. The second stage includes uncontrolled coughing followed by a whooping noise when the person breathes in air. During these severe coughing spells, a person might vomit, or the lips or face may look blue from a

lack of oxygen. Between coughing spells, a person may appear well. This stage can last 4–6 weeks. The last stage is when symptoms begin to disappear.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 4–21 days after exposure.

How is whooping cough diagnosed?

A healthcare provider may diagnose whooping cough based on symptoms. Laboratory testing of blood or nasal swabs can confirm that a person has whooping cough. Nasal swabs are the preferred test because they are more sensitive and less likely to lead to a false positive test result.

What is the treatment for whooping cough?

Certain antibiotics may make the illness less severe if started in the early stage of the disease. Infants younger than six months of age and people with severe cases may need to be hospitalized for treatment.

Do people who have been in contact with someone with whooping cough need to be tested and treated?

Close contacts of someone with whooping cough should be monitored for illness, tested if they develop a cough, and vaccinated if they are not up to date on vaccination. A healthcare provider or health department may recommend preventative antibiotics for contacts who are at high risk of severe illness from whooping cough.

How can whooping cough be prevented?

Whooping cough can be prevented by vaccination. These vaccines work well, but protection fades over time. Pertussis vaccine is combined with vaccines for tetanus and diphtheria and given as a single injection. The combination vaccine (DTaP) is given at 2, 4, 6, and 15 months of age and when a child enters school. Current recommendations also advise that children receive a single booster dose of vaccine (Tdap), preferably at 11–12 years of age. Adults who anticipate having close contact with an infant younger than age 12 months (e.g., pregnant women, new parents, grandparents, childcare providers, and healthcare providers) also should receive a single booster dose. Other adults also may receive a single booster dose of vaccine if they have not had a booster previously. Talk to a healthcare provider if you have questions about whooping cough vaccines.

How can I learn more about pertussis?

- If you have concerns about whooping cough, contact a healthcare provider.
- Contact your local health department. You can find your local health department at vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/

- Visit the CDC page on pertussis at [cdc.gov/pertussis/](https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/) for more information.

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