

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

About pertussis

Pertussis, commonly known as “whooping cough,” is a very contagious respiratory illness caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. Pertussis is spread by coughing or sneezing in close contact with others, who then breathe in the bacteria. The illness gets its nickname from the characteristic crowing or high pitched “whooping” sound that can occur when taking a deep breath following a coughing spell. The whoop is most common in infants.

Symptoms

Symptoms of pertussis usually develop seven to 10 days after exposure but can start as early as four days and take as long as 21 days to develop. Mild at first, symptoms are similar to the common cold:

- Runny nose
- Nasal congestion
- Red, watery eyes
- Fever
- Cough

After a week or two, symptoms worsen and the cough becomes more severe. The cough is characterized by episodes of numerous rapid coughs followed by the crowing or high pitched whoop. Thick mucous may be expelled from the lungs at the end of the episode or vomiting may occur.

What do I do if I get pertussis?

You should call your doctor immediately if coughing spells cause you or your child to:

- Vomit
- Turn red or blue
- Struggle to breathe or have noticeable pauses in breathing
- Inhale with a whooping sound¹

Since infants are particularly vulnerable to this disease, it is important to know how to protect your baby. If an infant catches pertussis, it could cause pneumonia and labored breathing.

How you can protect your child:

- If you are pregnant, get a vaccine in your third trimester.
- Be vigilant that no infected person is around your child.
- Make sure your baby gets the complete series of the vaccination according to the CDC's recommended schedule.
- Make sure you, as an adult, have received a Tdap vaccine booster (see below).

Where/how to get vaccinated

In the U.S., a vaccine for infants and children called DTaP is available to protect against three different diseases: diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis. Children should get five total doses of DTaP: one dose at the following ages: two months, four months, six months, 15 to 18 months and four to six years of age.²

For teens and adults, the Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis) vaccine booster helps protect those 11 through 18 years of age with a single dose. One dose of Tdap is recommended for everyone who hasn't had it.

For questions or concerns about the pertussis vaccination, please consult your doctor or healthcare team.

Vaccine safety

The pertussis vaccine is very safe and effective.

DTaP (children): The pertussis vaccine is very safe for infants and children. The most common side effects from the DTaP vaccine include fever, redness, swelling, soreness, or tenderness at the vaccination site.

Tdap (adults): The most common side effects for the Tdap vaccine are usually very mild, and may include redness, swelling, pain, and tenderness at the vaccination site, fatigue, body aches, or fever.

Pregnant women: The pertussis vaccine is very safe for pregnant women and their unborn babies, and getting the vaccine during pregnancy will not put you at an increased risk for pregnancy-related complications.³

Treatment

Antibiotics kill the bacteria that causes pertussis and help to speed recovery. It is essential that treatment be started early, as it may make the infection less severe. To protect close contacts of the infected person, antibiotics may be prescribed to help prevent infection.

Unfortunately, not much exists to relieve the cough, and though no longer still contagious, the cough may persist for months. Over-the-counter medications are considered to have little effect.

Additional information

For specific questions regarding childhood vaccinations, including the pertussis vaccine, or to make an appointment with a pediatric provider, please contact Mount Nittany Physician Group Pediatrics:

Mount Nittany Health - Bellefonte

129 Medical Park Lane
Bellefonte, PA 16823
814.355.3626

Mount Nittany Health - Boalsburg

3901 South Atherton Street
State College, PA 16801
814.466.7921

Resources

1. MAYO ARTICLE: <http://mayocl.in/1BZoYSr>
2. CDC ARTICLE: <http://1.usa.gov/1Day1Sq>
3. CDC ARTICLE: <http://ow.ly/IPr8h>