

Pertussis

FACT SHEET



Washtenaw County
Health Department

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis is a very contagious disease of the respiratory tract caused by bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. Pertussis is also known as “whooping cough” due to the “whoop” sound made when the infected person tries to breathe after a hard coughing fit. The whoop may not occur in children younger than 6 months of age, vaccinated children, adolescents, and adults.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms:

- Low grade fever, runny nose, sneezing and occasional cough.

Later symptoms:

- In 1-2 weeks the cough becomes more severe.
- During bouts of coughing, the lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air. Vomiting can occur with severe episodes.
- In between coughing episodes, people may feel and appear fairly healthy.
- Many people cough for 1 month or longer.

Complications:

- For infants, complications include pneumonia, convulsions, and, in rare cases, brain damage. The majority of deaths from pertussis occur in infants younger than 3 months of age.
- Complications in teens and adults include difficulty sleeping, pneumonia and rib fracture.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is spread through airborne droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. The greatest risk of spread is during the early stage when the symptoms resemble a cold.

How is it treated?

- Call your doctor if you think you or your children have been exposed.
- An antibiotic is usually prescribed for treatment.
- Stay home from school, work, and other activities until you have taken an appropriate antibiotic for 5 days.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid being dehydrated.
- Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing.
- Wash hands often using soap and water.

How is it prevented?

Babies are the most vulnerable to Pertussis:

Cocooning is critical protection for infants. Cocooning surrounds the infant with vaccinated people such as family, friends, childcare and healthcare providers.

Vaccine for children under 7 years:

The DTaP vaccine includes protection against pertussis. Children should get 5 doses of this vaccine. Infants need their first dose at 2 months of age, with 3 more doses given by 18 months of age. A booster dose of DTaP is given at 4-6 years.

Vaccine for people 7 years of age and older:

A dose of Tdap vaccine is recommended at age 11 or 12 years. This dose can be given as early as 7 years of age if the child missed earlier DTaP doses. All adults who did not get Tdap as a teen should get one dose.

Pregnant women:

Tdap vaccine is recommended for pregnant women. Contact your health care provider.

Pertussis vaccines are effective, but not perfect. They typically offer good levels of protection within the first 2 years after getting the vaccine, but protection decreases over time.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.