

Pertussis

What parents need to know

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as “whooping cough,” is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. These bacteria attach to and damage cells lining the upper respiratory system. Pertussis is best known for the characteristic “whooping” sound heard in some children as they breathe in through a still partially closed airway.

Symptoms of Pertussis

Initially, pertussis symptoms resemble a common cold with runny nose and sore throat. After 1-2 weeks, infected persons develop a persistent, violent cough that may last for weeks to months. This cough can result in post-cough vomiting, bursting of blood vessels in the eye, and rib fracture.

Over half of children under 1 year of age who get pertussis must be hospitalized. Infants with pertussis have severe cough with choking and may develop pneumonia, air leaks in the lung, seizures, and bleeding in the eyes and brain. **Pertussis in infants and young children may be fatal**, particularly in those unvaccinated.

How Pertussis is spread

Pertussis usually spreads when an infected person coughs or sneezes in close proximity to others, who then breathe in the bacteria. Many infants, who are too young to be vaccinated, are infected by family or caregivers who may not know they have the disease.

Treatment

Unlike a cold, cough medicines do not work against pertussis and should not be used unless directed by your doctor. Early treatment with antibiotics can make the disease less severe. If you suspect your child has pertussis, make an appointment with your healthcare provider. At home, practice good hand hygiene, keep your child **hydrated with plenty of fluids**, and feed them small meals frequently throughout the day to help prevent vomiting. A cool mist vaporizer may help sooth your child’s cough.

The Vaccine Booster: DTaP and TdaP

DTaP, the recommended pertussis vaccine for infants and children, protects against three diseases: Diphtheria, Tetanus, and Pertussis. Children need 5 DTaP shots between 2 months and 6 years of age and are not fully protected until they have received the entire series. Protection against pertussis fades over time. **TdaP** is a booster shot recommended at the 11-12 year old check-up. Teenagers and adults who did not receive TdaP at their 11-12 yr old check up should get one dose of TdaP, particularly if they are around infants or children who are not fully vaccinated. As with all vaccines, the pertussis shot is not 100% effective.

Prevention Tips

Immunize your family and yourself

Pertussis can be deadly to infants and young children. Children should receive their entire DTaP series. Caregivers and adolescent siblings of young children should get a dose of TdaP booster vaccine.

Keep sick children at home

Ill children should stay home from school until they have completed their 5 day antibiotic regimen or lab tests have ruled out pertussis.

Wash your hands often

Hand hygiene is the best way to prevent the spread of infection. Encourage your child to cleanse his/her hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand gel often, particularly after coughing, sneezing, playing, and before handling food.

