

Frequently Asked Questions

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory disease. Pertussis is caused by a bacterium that lives in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur in people of all ages. Pertussis is most severe in infants less than one year old. More than half of these infants who get the disease must be hospitalized. Older children and adults can also get pertussis as protection against pertussis decreases over time, but it is usually not as serious. Many infants who get pertussis catch it from their older brothers and sisters, or from their parents or other caregiver who might not even know they have the disease.

How do people get pertussis?

Pertussis is very easily spread from person to person, especially before coughing starts. A person can spread pertussis up to three weeks after symptoms appear. When an infected person talks, coughs or sneezes, the bacteria are released into the air and enter another person's body through the nose, mouth or throat. People can also become sick if they come in contact with the mucus or saliva (spit) from an infected person.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms of pertussis are like the common cold and include:

- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Runny nose
- Fever

However within two weeks, the cough becomes more serious with episodes of rapid uncontrollable coughing spasms followed by a high pitched "whoop" sound when the person tries to take a breath. The coughing spasm may also be followed by gagging or vomiting. These coughing spells can make breathing, eating and sleeping very hard. A final recovery stage with coughing may last weeks or months.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A health care provider will observe the signs and symptoms and collect a sample of saliva from the throat for laboratory testing.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

Since pertussis is caused by a bacterium, it can be treated with antibiotics. A person's risk of spreading the disease to others drops five days after the start of the antibiotic therapy.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Pertussis is a vaccine preventable disease. Getting vaccinated against pertussis will protect people from getting the disease.

Who should get the pertussis vaccine?

The pertussis vaccine is combined with the diphtheria and tetanus anti-toxin vaccines. The type of combination vaccination that is given depends on the person's age. The Diphtheria, Tetanus and acellular Pertussis (DTaP) vaccine is given to infants and children younger than seven years. Although a person may have been vaccinated as a young child, protection decreases over time. The Tdap vaccine booster is available for older children and adults. People in contact with newborns and infants are recommended to get the vaccine.

Where can I get more information on pertussis?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health <http://www.nj.gov/health>
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov>

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.

Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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