

Kent County Health Department

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet



HEALTH
DEPARTMENT
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What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a serious contagious disease. It most often attacks the upper respiratory tract after entering the nose or throat.

Who gets pertussis?

People of any age can get pertussis. Young infants are at greatest danger of getting the disease. They also suffer the most serious complications. More cases are also being reported among teens and adults.

Pertussis most often affects:

- People who haven't been vaccinated at all
- People who didn't get all the vaccinations in the series
- Older people who were previously vaccinated as children

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread when a sick person coughs around other people. Pertussis is highly infectious. It can infect up to 70 to 100 percent of close household contacts who have not been vaccinated.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The symptoms of pertussis occur in phases. The first phase, which lasts one to two weeks, has cold-like symptoms with an occasional mild cough.

The second phase lasts one to six weeks. It is marked by severe bouts of coughing. The coughing is followed by a high-pitched whooping sound as the person tries to catch

his breath. Often, a person's face will turn blue from coughing. Vomiting and exhaustion also may take place after coughing.

The third phase can last for several months. During this phase, the bouts of coughing slowly begin to decline.

Children and adults with pertussis often have no symptoms or have only mild symptoms such as a nagging cough. It can still be spread to other unprotected people including babies.

How soon do infected people get sick?

The first cold-like symptoms usually start five to 10 days after having contact with a sick person. However, it may take as long as 21 days for symptoms to start. During this time, few people suspect their cold symptoms or mild cough is pertussis yet they can spread it to others.

Can pertussis be spread from person to person?

Yes, pertussis can be spread from person to person. The germs pass from the sick person into the nose or throat of others. It can be spread by direct contact or through the air.

How is pertussis treated?

There is no cure for pertussis. Antibiotics are given to help prevent the spread. If started early enough, the antibiotics can also help to make the disease less severe. Antibiotics are usually taken for 14 days.

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People who are close contacts of a sick person need to take antibiotics and maybe even get a booster dose of pertussis vaccine. Patients and close contacts need to be under a doctor's care. Pertussis vaccine is not given to contacts over the age of seven.

Should an infected person be excluded from school or work?
Any person who has symptoms of pertussis should not go to daycare, school, or work. He should stay away from other people until he has completed at least five days of antibiotic treatment.

How can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis is to make sure that children get the recommended vaccines to prevent the disease. The primary series of vaccines is given at two, four, and six months of age. A booster dose is also given at 12 to 18 months of age.

People with pertussis should be isolated from other people. If someone is exposed to an infected person, some protection may result if 14 days of antibiotics are started quickly after exposure.