

Pertussis FACTSHEET

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What is Pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious disease involving the respiratory tract (lungs). A bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis* causes this infection.

Who gets Pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Young children and infants may have a more severe illness, especially if they have not received at least three doses of the pertussis vaccine.

How is Pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread person to person by direct contact with respiratory droplets from the nose and throat of infected individuals. This frequently occurs when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.

What are the symptoms of Pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially, symptoms resemble those of a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of numerous rapid coughs followed by a crowing or high-pitched whoop. Older persons or partially immunized children generally have milder symptoms if they become infected.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually five to 10 days but may be as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread Pertussis?

A person can be contagious from seven days following exposure up to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. A person is no longer considered contagious once they have strictly completed a physician's prescribed course of antibiotic therapy.

What are the complications associated with Pertussis?

Complications of pertussis may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy (disorders of the brain), and episodes of apnea (brief cessation of breathing). The most severe complication, and the cause of most pertussis-related deaths is secondary pneumonia.

Is there a vaccine for Pertussis?

A total of 5 doses of pertussis vaccine is recommended for children younger than age 7. The recommended schedule for the vaccine is for it to be given at two, four, six and 15 months of age and between four and six years of age. A booster is also recommended for adolescents and adults between 11 and 65 years of age.

What can be done to prevent the spread of Pertussis?

The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community. Treatment of cases, household contacts and other close contacts with antibiotics can prevent or reduce transmission. Close contacts younger than age 7 who have not completed the vaccination series, should also receive their next scheduled dose of vaccine at this time. Close contacts between the ages of 11 and 65 should receive a booster vaccine if they have not previously received it.

Want more information?

Information about Pertussis (Whooping Cough) and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call (202) 442-9371.

