

# Pertussis

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## What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a contagious bacterial disease that affects the respiratory tract. It is commonly known as “whooping cough”.

## Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can infect persons of all ages. Severe illness is more common in young children who have not been immunized. Older children, teens, and adults with pertussis may have milder symptoms. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in very young infants, teens, and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough.

## How is pertussis spread?

The bacteria are spread through the air when another person breathes in the droplets from the infected person’s nose, throat, or mouth during coughing, sneezing, or talking. Exposure usually occurs after repeated indoor face-to-face contact. Pertussis is most contagious in the early stage of the illness before the onset of the severe coughing and up to 2 weeks after the severe coughing begins.

## What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. At first, symptoms resemble those of a cold, with sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever, and a mild cough. After 1-2 weeks the cough becomes more severe and uncontrolled. Coughing spells may be intense and followed by a crowing or high-pitched “whoop” as they struggle to inhale air. Thick, clear mucus may be discharged. The coughing is so severe that it can be hard for the person to eat, drink, or sleep. During bouts of coughing, the lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air. After the coughing spells, vomiting and exhaustion is often experienced. The severe coughing can last 1 to 2 months or longer. Coughing spells are more frequent at night. Young children who have not been immunized have the most severe symptoms. In older children and adults, the symptoms are usually milder and without the typical whoop.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally begin 7 to 10 days after exposure to the bacteria, but may not show up for as long as 6 weeks.

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

A person can transmit pertussis starting about 7 days after being infected, and remain infectious until about 3 weeks after the onset of coughing. By taking antibiotics, the contagious period is reduced to about 5 days from the start of treatment.

## How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may suspect a patient has pertussis based on symptoms. To confirm the diagnosis, a sample of mucus must be taken from the back of the nose for testing. A

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laboratory then tests the sample to determine whether the patient has pertussis.

### **Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?**

A pertussis infection results in immunity for several years, but the immunity eventually fades.

### **What is the treatment for pertussis?**

Pertussis is treated with a course of antibiotics. Call your doctor if you think you, or your children, have been exposed. It is often recommended that close contacts of the infected person also be given antibiotics to prevent or reduce the severity of the disease.

Drink plenty of fluids to avoid being dehydrated. Carefully cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing. Wash hands often using soap and water. Stay away from others, especially infants and young children, until you have been on antibiotics for 5 days. Treatment for young children may include supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation to help the child during the prolonged period of coughing.

### **Are there complications from pertussis?**

The most common complication is pneumonia, which is the main cause of death for those with pertussis. Seizures, loss of appetite, middle ear infection, and dehydration can also occur. In rare cases, encephalopathy (disorders of the brain) and death can occur. 80% of pertussis-related deaths occur in children under 1 year of age.

### **How can pertussis be prevented?**

The pertussis vaccine is effective in preventing the illness in infants and children. The vaccine is given in a series of 5 shots from two months of age until school age. The pertussis vaccine is given in a combination with diphtheria and tetanus vaccines, called DTaP. People ages 11-64 should receive a dose of Tdap. Adults 65 years and older who have close contact with infants (grandparents, child care providers, and healthcare providers) should get a dose of Tdap. Women should receive Tdap before becoming pregnant. Women who have not previously received Tdap should receive a dose of Tdap in the immediate postpartum period. No vaccine is 100% effective, so those who have been vaccinated may still get sick with pertussis.

### **How do I get more information on pertussis?**

Calhoun County Public Health Department  
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Website: <http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/>

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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