

Pertussis (whooping cough) Fact Sheet

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious bacterial infection that causes an uncontrollable, violent cough lasting several weeks or even months. It is caused by a bacterium that is found in the mouth, nose, and throat of an infected person. Pertussis may begin with cold-like symptoms or a dry cough that progress to episodes of severe coughing.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Children who are too young to be fully vaccinated and those who have not yet completed the primary vaccination series are a highest risk for severe illness. Since the 1980's, the number of reported pertussis cases has gradually increased in the United States. In 2005, over 25,000 cases of pertussis were reported in the United States, the highest number of reported cases since 1959. Approximately 60% of the cases were in adolescents and adults and may be the result of decreasing immunity in this population.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is primarily spread from person to person by direct contact with mucous or droplets from the nose and throat of infected individuals. Frequently, older siblings who may be harboring the bacteria in their nose and throat can bring the disease home and infect an infant in the household.

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. A thick, clear mucous may be discharged from the nose. These episodes may recur for 1 to 2 months, and are more frequent at night. Older people or partially immunized children generally have milder symptoms.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually 7 to 10 days with a range of 4 to 21 days and rarely may be as long as 42 days.

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

If untreated, a person can transmit pertussis from onset of symptoms to 3 weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. The period of communicability is reduced to 5 days after treatment with antibiotics.

What are the complications associated with pertussis?

Major complications of pertussis are more common among infants and young children and may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, sleep disturbance, syncope (temporary loss of consciousness), dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy (a disorder of the brain), apneic episodes (brief delay in breathing), and death.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

The recommended antibiotics for the treatment and postexposure prevention of pertussis include azithromycin (Zithromax), erythromycin and clarithromycin (Biaxin). Alternately, trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (Bactrim) can be used.

Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

Neither vaccination nor natural infection with pertussis guarantees lifelong protective immunity against pertussis. Since immunity decreases after 5-10 years from the last pertussis vaccine dose, older children, adolescents, and adults are at risk of becoming infected with pertussis and need vaccination.

What is the vaccine for pertussis?

Infants and Children - The childhood vaccine for pertussis is usually given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. Immunization authorities recommend that DTap (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis) vaccine be given at 2, 4, and 6 and 15-18 months of age and between 4 and 6 years of age.

Preteens and Adolescents- In 2005, a new vaccine was approved as a single booster vaccination for adolescents and adults called Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and acellular pertussis)

The preferred age for routine vaccination with Tdap is 11 or 12 years old. Adolescents, aged 11 through 18 should receive a single dose of Tdap instead of Td (tetanus, diphtheria) for booster immunization against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis if they have completed the recommended childhood DTP/DTaP vaccination series.

A single dose of Tdap vaccine is also recommended for children aged 7 through 10 years who are not fully vaccinated against pertussis.

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 with appropriate antibiotics, such as Zithromax, will have pertussis should stay away from young children and infants until properly treated. Treatment of people who are close contacts of pertussis cases is also an important part of prevention.

How long will my child be excluded from school?

If your child is treated with antibiotics, they will be excluded for 5 days after the start of antibiotic therapy. A note from the primary care provider is required. Without antibiotic treatment, your child will be excluded for 3 weeks until symptoms disappear. In the event an outbreak of pertussis occurs, those children who have not been vaccinated for pertussis due to medical or philosophical reasons will be excluded from school until all cases have resolved.