

Information for the Public on Pertussis (Whooping cough)

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis also known as whooping cough, is a contagious illness caused by bacteria. It occurs in children more often than in adults, but adults with milder, undiagnosed symptoms can transmit the disease to infants and children.

What are the symptoms of pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis can be divided into 3 stages:

1. During the first stage, symptoms are similar to having a cold. There may be a slight fever, sneezing, runny nose, dry cough, loss of appetite, and irritability.
2. During the second stage (about 1 to 2 weeks later), the cough becomes more intense. There may be short, intense coughing spells followed by a long gasp for air (this is when the “whoop” is heard). The face may turn blue, the nose may bleed, and vomiting may occur following a coughing spell.
3. During the third stage, the cough is less intense and less frequent, and appetite begins to increase. Eventually, maybe many weeks later, the cough stops.

Adults may have a mild form of pertussis, with prolonged cough as the only symptom.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is usually spread by contact with an infected person’s nose or throat secretions. This can happen by touching an infected person’s nose or throat drainage, or it can be spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are given to make the illness less contagious, but they do not reduce the symptoms unless given very early in illness.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Be sure that children are up to date on their shots, especially the diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DTaP) series. There is a pertussis containing vaccine (Tdap) available for adolescents and older adults to boost their pertussis immunity. Please ask your doctor for the booster vaccine. Persons who have been in very close contact with a person with pertussis should take medication to prevent illness.