



Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What causes it?

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a highly contagious disease (easily spread from one person to another) caused by the *Bordetella pertusis* bacteria (germs). The bacteria are spread through droplets from the nose and mouth when the infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms include a runny nose, low-grade fever, and mild, occasional cough. These symptoms usually appear about seven to ten days after exposure to the bacteria. The cough gradually becomes more severe. After one to two weeks, the person begins to have episodes of hard, fast coughing that end in a long inhalation of air that sounds like a high pitched whoop, hence the nickname “whooping cough.” During an episode, the person may turn blue and appear ill and distressed. The person may vomit and show signs of exhaustion immediately after the episode.

The whooping cough episodes may last one to six weeks. The cough slowly goes away but may return if the person has other respiratory infections. Very young children (less than 1 year of age) are most severely affected. Older children, teenagers and older adults may have symptoms ranging from very mild to a persistent cough. They do not usually make the whooping sound while coughing. However, they are still able to pass the disease on to other people.

How is it diagnosed?

A health care provider should diagnose pertussis. A lab test may be done, especially if the patient is a young infant or someone who has had the pertussis vaccine.

How is it treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat and prevent the spread of pertussis. Persons who have been in close contact (i.e., lives in the same home) with someone who has pertussis should be treated. In addition, those individuals exposed to pertussis who are at high risk of severe illness or who will have close contact with a person at high risk of severe illness should be treated. Persons recovering from pertussis infections should also get plenty of rest and fluids.

How is it prevented?

Immunizations are the best preventive method against pertussis. One immunization is called DTaP. It is for infants and young children. Tdap is another vaccine. It is for older children and adults. Both vaccines



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are a combination of Diphtheria, Tetanus and Pertussis vaccines. In addition, covering mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing can reduce the spread of the virus. Frequent hand washing is also recommended.

Why get vaccinated?

Pertussis is highly contagious. Major complications most often occur in infants and young children, including pneumonia, seizures, and brain damage. Young children can die from pertussis.

School/Childcare Attendance:

Any person who has pertussis should not go to school, childcare or work until five days after treatment has begun. For more information, contact the Guilford County Division of Public Health by calling 336-641-7777 or visit [GuilfordCountyNC.gov/HealthyGuilford](https://www.guilfordcountync.gov/HealthyGuilford)

Free language assistance is available upon request.