

FACT SHEET

PERTUSSIS (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis is a disease caused by a bacteria. It causes severe spells of coughing. These spells can interfere with eating, drinking and breathing. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, convulsions, inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) and sometimes death.

Who can get pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. It is most common in infants less than one year old, but anyone can get it. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in teens and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread through the air after an infected person coughs or sneezes. Other people breathe in infected droplets.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts like a cold with symptoms of runny nose and an irritating cough. Within one to two weeks the cough develops into coughing fits. The fits are a series of violent coughs during which the victim struggles for breath. A gasping for air, which produces a high-pitched whooping sound, follows the coughing. The coughing fits occur more frequently at night, and are often followed by vomiting. Between spells, the person usually appears to be well. Adults, teens, and vaccinated children may have milder symptoms.

How long is an infected person able to spread pertussis?

Without treatment an infected person can spread the disease from the time he or she starts coughing through 21 days after the start of the cough. After five days of treatment with an appropriate antibiotic, an infected person cannot spread the disease.

Can a person get pertussis again?

Yes.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may think a patient has pertussis because of the symptoms, but a sample of mucus must be taken from the back of the nose for testing. This sample is then sent for testing to determine whether the patient has pertussis.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

Treatment with an appropriate antibiotic may help if given early in the illness. Other treatments such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation may help the child during the prolonged period of severe coughing.

Should people who have been around a person with pertussis be treated?

All household and other close contacts of persons with pertussis, regardless of age, should receive an antibiotic to prevent them from becoming ill and spreading whooping cough disease to others. Vaccination status should be assessed.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Pertussis may be prevented through routine immunization. Pertussis is spread through the air after an infected person coughs or sneezes. Other people breathe in infected droplets. Cover your mouth when you cough, stay away from others when they are coughing, wash your hands frequently. Ask your health care clinician/local public health department about vaccine for adolescents/adults.

Where is pertussis vaccine available?

All county health departments in Iowa administer the vaccine. You may also check with your private health care provider.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor or nurse, your local health department (listed in the telephone book under local government).
- Iowa Department of Public Health, Bureau of Disease Prevention and Immunization, (800) 831-6293.