

# Pertussis (Whooping cough)



## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious (easily spread) respiratory disease caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*.

### Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur in people of all ages, but babies are at greatest risk for getting pertussis and then having serious complications from it, including death. About half of babies younger than 1 year old who get pertussis need care in the hospital. Many infants who get pertussis catch it from their older brothers and sisters, or from their parents or other caregiver who might not even know they have the disease.

If pertussis is circulating in the community, there's a chance that even a fully vaccinated person of any age can catch this very contagious disease. But if you received pertussis vaccines, your infection is usually less serious.

### How do people get pertussis?

Pertussis spreads easily from person to person through coughing and sneezing. A person with pertussis can infect up to 12 to 15 other people. Pertussis starts off with cold-like symptoms and maybe a mild cough or fever. But after 1 to 2 weeks, severe coughing can begin. Unlike the common cold, pertussis can become a series of coughing fits that continues for weeks.

The name "whooping cough" comes from the sound people make gasping for air after a pertussis coughing fit. However, not everyone with pertussis will cough and many who cough will not "whoop." Babies may not cough at all. Instead, they may have life-threatening pauses in breathing (apnea) or struggle to breathe. Any time someone is struggling to breathe, it is important to get them to a doctor right away.

### What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms of pertussis are like the common cold and include:

- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Runny nose
- Fever

However within two weeks, the cough becomes more serious with episodes of rapid uncontrollable coughing spasms followed by a high pitched "whoop" sound when the person tries to take a breath. The coughing spasm may also be followed by gagging or vomiting. These coughing spells can make breathing, eating and sleeping very hard. A final recovery stage with coughing may last weeks or months.

### How is pertussis diagnosed?

A health care provider will look at your signs and symptoms and collect a sample of saliva from the throat for laboratory testing.

### What is the treatment for pertussis?

Healthcare providers generally treat pertussis with antibiotics and early treatment is very important. Treatment may make your infection less serious if you start it early, before coughing fits begin. Treatment can also help prevent spreading the disease to close contacts (people who have spent a lot of time around the infected person).

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

The best way to prevent pertussis among babies, children, teens, pregnant women, and adults is to get vaccinated. Also, keep babies and other people at high risk for pertussis complications away from infected people.

Two vaccines in the United States help prevent whooping cough: DTaP and Tdap. These vaccines also provide protection against [tetanus](#) and [diphtheria](#).

## **Who should get the pertussis vaccine?**

The pertussis vaccine is combined with the diphtheria and tetanus anti-toxin vaccines. The type of combination vaccination that is given depends on the person's age. The Diphtheria, Tetanus and acellular Pertussis (DTaP) vaccine is given to infants and children younger than seven years. Protection from these vaccines decrease over time, so older children and adults are recommended to receive the Tdap vaccine to help increase protection from pertussis.

Babies do not start building their own protection against whooping cough until they get vaccinated at two months old. This leaves babies unprotected in the first months of life when they are at highest risk . For this reason, pregnant persons are recommended to get the Tdap vaccine during the 27th through 36th week of *each* pregnancy to help protect babies from pertussis.

The following graphic shows the pertussis vaccine recommendations for different age groups: <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/vaccines.html>.

## **Where can I get more information on pertussis?**

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health <http://www.nj.gov/health>
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/>

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.

Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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