

Pertussis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can affect people of all ages, but infants are at the highest risk for severe illness and complications, including death.

Older children, teens, and adults can also get pertussis. In adults, it often causes prolonged coughing illness that may lead to repeated medical visits and missed work, especially if not initially diagnosed. Adults are also a common source of infection for infants through close contact.

How do people get pertussis?

The bacteria that cause whooping cough spread easily from person to person through the air. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, they release small droplets containing the bacteria into the air. Others can then become infected by breathing in these droplets. People with pertussis can spread the infection from the start of symptoms and for at least two weeks after coughing begins. Without treatment, the contagious period may last longer.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Early symptoms often resemble a common cold and may include:

- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Runny nose
- Mild fever

After 1–2 weeks, the cough typically becomes more severe and may include:

- Rapid, uncontrollable coughing fits
- A high-pitched “whoop” sound when trying to breathe in (not always present)
- Gagging or vomiting after coughing episodes

These coughing fits can make breathing, eating, and sleeping difficult.

A prolonged recovery phase may follow, with coughing lasting weeks to months.

Not everyone with pertussis develops the classic “whoop,” and adults often do not. Infants may not cough at all and instead may have pauses in breathing (apnea) or significant breathing difficulty. Any breathing difficulty requires immediate medical attention.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A health care provider diagnoses pertussis based on symptoms and exposure history. A sample from the back of the throat or nasal area is collected and tested in a laboratory.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics. Early treatment is important because it can:

- Reduce the severity of illness if started early
- Help prevent spread to others

Treatment is most effective when started before severe coughing fits develop.

How can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis is vaccination.

Additional prevention steps include avoiding close contact with infected individuals, especially for infants and others at high risk for complications.

Two vaccines help protect against pertussis:

- DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, and acellular pertussis) for infants and children under 7
- Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, and acellular pertussis) for older children, teens, and adults

Who should get the pertussis vaccine?

Protection from pertussis vaccination decreases over time, so booster doses are needed.

- DTaP is given in a series to infants and young children under 7 years old.
- Tdap is recommended for older children, teens, and adults to maintain protection.

Infants do not begin developing their own protection until vaccination starts at 2 months of age, leaving them vulnerable in early life when risk is highest.

To help protect newborns, pregnant people are recommended to receive a Tdap vaccine during each pregnancy, ideally between 27 and 36 weeks, which helps pass short-term protection to the baby before birth.

Where can I get more information on pertussis?

- Health care providers
- Local health departments: localhealth.nj.gov
- New Jersey Department of Health: nj.gov/health/
- National Foundation for Infectious Diseases: nfid.org/infectious-disease/whooping-cough/

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