

Quick Facts

About...Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a contagious disease caused by *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria. It may cause severe coughing fits that can interfere with breathing. Although pertussis is often milder in older children and adults, undiagnosed persons can transmit the disease to infants and young children. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia, seizures, and sometimes death. Most of these serious problems occur in infants who are younger than a year old. Indiana had 271 reported cases in 2008 and 392 in 2009.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The symptoms of pertussis occur in three stages:

1. During the first stage, symptoms are similar to a cold: 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 coughing fits may be followed by vomiting, nose bleeds, or bluish color to the lips or face.
3. During the third stage, the cough is less intense and less frequent, and appetite begins to increase. Eventually the cough stops, although this may take several months.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread by contact with nose or throat secretions from an infected person. This can happen when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Without treatment, an infected person can spread the disease for up to three weeks from the time the cough begins. However, after five days of treatment with the appropriate antibiotic, an infected person cannot spread pertussis.

Who is at risk for pertussis?

People who are unvaccinated, have not completed a full series of pertussis vaccine, or who have not received pertussis vaccine for several years are at increased risk for pertussis. Infants who are too young to be fully vaccinated are at greatest risk for severe illness and death from pertussis-related complications. Adolescents and adults may also experience complications from pertussis.

How do I know if I have pertussis?

If you have had close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with pertussis or if you have symptoms that match those described above, you should consult your health care provider. Your health care provider may test you for pertussis and prescribe antibiotics for treatment.

How is pertussis treated?

While antibiotics make pertussis less contagious, they do not get rid of the cough unless taken very early in the illness. All household members and other close contacts of persons with pertussis should receive antibiotic treatment to prevent spreading pertussis to others.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Keep yourself and your children up to date with vaccines. The diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DtaP) vaccine is a five dose series for children under 7 years of age. It is given at the 2 month, 4 month, 6 month, and 12-15 month well baby visits and again before kindergarten at 4-6 years of age. Adolescents and adults (ages 10 years and older) should also receive one dose of Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis) vaccine to provide further protection against pertussis. It is particularly important that medical providers and anyone having contact with an infant be fully vaccinated with the appropriate pertussis vaccine for their age. Tdap can be administered regardless of interval since the last tetanus or diphtheria vaccine. Indiana requires that students in grades 6-12 receive a single dose of Tdap.

See your health care provider to determine if you need immunization against pertussis.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Pertussis/>

This page was last reviewed May 2011.