

Pertussis Questions and Answers

For Parents & Caregivers



What is pertussis?

Pertussis, commonly known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious bacterial infection that is characterized by severe coughing. It is one of the most common vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms of pertussis are similar to a cold: a runny nose, sneezing, possibly a low-grade fever and a cough. After one or two weeks, the cough becomes severe as noted by the following:

- The cough occurs in sudden, uncontrollable bursts where one cough follows the next without a break for breath.
- Some children will make a high-pitched whooping sound when breathing in after a coughing episode. Whooping is less common in infants and adults.
- Coughing episodes may cause vomiting.
- Young infants may not cough but instead have difficulty feeding, gagging, vomiting and apnea (periods where infant stops breathing).
- Children may appear well in between coughing episodes.

Who gets pertussis?

Anyone can get pertussis! Pertussis is most commonly diagnosed in infants and young children, though adults account for more than half of all cases. Children and infants often get pertussis from older siblings or adults who might not know they have the disease.

What complications are associated with pertussis?

Pertussis in infants is often severe. Infants are more likely than older children or adults to develop complications. The most common complication of pertussis is bacterial pneumonia. Rare complications include seizures, inflammation of the brain, and death.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread by respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. In general, a person is at greatest risk of getting the disease if they are in close contact with someone with pertussis for a prolonged period of time.

How long is a person with pertussis contagious?

Pertussis is most contagious early in the illness. Persons who have pertussis, who have completed five days of appropriate antibiotics are no longer contagious. Without treatment, infected persons can spread pertussis during the first 3 weeks they are coughing. Children with pertussis should be kept out of daycare and school until they are no longer contagious.

How long can a person have pertussis?

A person can have pertussis for as long as 3 months. Treatment with antibiotics prevents further spread of the disease, but does not immediately resolve the symptoms.

What tests are available to diagnose pertussis?

Your healthcare provider can perform tests to confirm the diagnosis of pertussis. To test for pertussis, the nasal passages are swabbed. Material on the swab is then examined in the lab for the presence of pertussis bacteria.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics, if started early, may help reduce the severity of symptoms. Treatment with antibiotics may not resolve symptoms, but will prevent the spread of disease to others.



Have questions?

Talk with your Doctor.

www.health.state.ga.us/pertussis/

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Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

Yes. There are two pertussis vaccines (DTaP and Tdap). Both vaccines are given in combination with tetanus and diphtheria. Your age determines which vaccine you should receive.

- **DTaP vaccine** is given to **children through 6 years of age**. Children should receive shots at 2, 4, 6, and 15-18 months of age, and at 4 to 6 years of age.
- **Children 7 through 10 years** who are not fully vaccinated against pertussis should receive a single dose of Tdap. Children who have never received any doses, or don't know if they have, should receive a series of three vaccinations containing tetanus and diphtheria toxoids, and one of these should be Tdap.
- **Adolescents 11 through 12 years** should receive a single dose of Tdap, which is usually given at their pre-adolescent check-up.
- **Adolescents 13 through 18 years** who missed getting the Tdap should get it the next time they see their health care provider.
- **Adults age 19 through 64 years** should receive a single dose of Tdap. This is especially important if they will be in contact with infants younger than 1 year of age.
- **Adults 65 years and older** who have or anticipate having close contact with an infant younger than 1 year of age should receive a single dose of Tdap. It can also be given to other adults who wish to be protected against pertussis disease.
- **Pregnant women** who have not received a Tdap vaccination should receive Tdap in the late second or third trimester for **each** pregnancy irrespective of past history of Tdap receipt. Women who do not receive Tdap during pregnancy should get their Tdap vaccination right after delivery.

Timing of Tdap: If you haven't received Tdap yet but have received Td vaccine recently, you should get Tdap. Ask your health care provider for Tdap at your next visit.

My child has been exposed to pertussis, what should I do?

If you think your child has been exposed to pertussis contact your doctor immediately. A doctor can prescribe post-exposure medication that will prevent further spread of disease and may modify the severity of disease, if given within 3 weeks of exposure.

Is it okay to take my child to public places (ie. grocery store, daycare, playground)?

If you think your child has been exposed to pertussis you should avoid taking him or her to public places until a doctor refutes or confirms pertussis. If your child has a current pertussis infection, you should avoid taking him or her to public places until the disease has resolved (after completing 5 days of antibiotics or 21 days after cough onset). All contact with unimmunized children, immunocompromised persons or pregnant women should be avoided.

Children with pertussis should be kept out of daycare and school until they are no longer contagious.

Can a person who has been fully immunized get pertussis?

People whose immunizations are up-to-date can get pertussis. Immunity from receiving the pertussis vaccine decreases over time, so adolescents and adults who were fully immunized as children do not have full protection from pertussis. Adolescents and adults should receive Tdap, a pertussis booster vaccine, to increase their immunity.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Routine vaccination is the best way to prevent pertussis. However, additional steps to prevent the spread of disease may include:

- Avoiding close contact with others who are coughing or ill
- Washing hands often
- Covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue or cough and sneeze into your sleeve
- Stay at home if ill
- Seek medical attention if pertussis-like symptoms develop



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