

Pertussis (Whooping Cough): What You Need to Know

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a persistent cough illness. Anyone at any age can get whooping cough. It can be very serious and deadly to infants and people with a compromised immune system, like people with cancer or HIV.

What are the symptoms?

- Symptoms of pertussis usually appear 5 to 10 days after exposure but can take up to 21 days.
- It starts with cold-like symptoms (runny nose, sneezing) and a mild, but annoying cough. After about a week, the cough becomes more severe and may cause vomiting and difficulty breathing.
- Sometimes there is a high-pitched whooping sound when breathing in. Coughing spells become less frequent over time but may continue for several weeks or months until the lungs heal.

How does it spread?

- Pertussis bacteria are spread through droplets made during coughing or sneezing.
- These droplets don't travel very far through the air and usually only infect people who have direct, face-to-face contact with a person sick with whooping cough, while they were contagious.

When can a person spread pertussis?

- People with pertussis can spread it to others:
 - 7 days before the start of their cough through the 21 days after cough begins (the first day of coughing is day 0) **OR**
 - Until they have finished 5 days of antibiotic treatment
- While contagious (either of the two bullets above), people with pertussis should stay home from childcare, school, work, and other activities, keep away from others in their home, and avoid traveling.
- We will attempt to notify people who had direct, face-to-face contact with someone with pertussis while they were contagious.

How can we prevent pertussis?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent pertussis and it's part of the regularly recommended childhood vaccines. Health experts also recommend a pertussis vaccine booster (known as Tdap) for adolescents and adults.

- **Check your immunization status.** If you were vaccinated in Wisconsin, you can access your vaccination record using the Wisconsin Immunization Registry (WIR). Visit dhfswir.org/PR/clientSearch.do. If you aren't up to date on your immunizations:
 - **If you have insurance:** Ask your medical provider or visit an area pharmacy.
 - **If you are uninsured:** We can vaccinate you for free. Visit publichealthmdc.com/immunizations to learn more.
- **Take antibiotics if your medical provider tells you to.** In certain cases, providers will prescribe antibiotics for people who were close contacts to someone with pertussis, even if they don't yet have symptoms.
- **Practice good hygiene.** Stay at home if you are sick. When coughing, cover your mouth with a tissue or cough into your sleeve. Wash your hands often.

Can people who have been immunized still get pertussis?

Even if you have had pertussis vaccines, the protective effects can decrease over time. You could still get pertussis, but the symptoms will be less severe than if you were not vaccinated.

Is there a lab test for pertussis?

Yes, but only if someone has symptoms. Most commonly, the nasal passage is swabbed, and the lab staff look for the pertussis bacteria on the swab.

If you have questions, please contact your medical provider, or call Public Health Madison & Dane County at 608-266-4821. The state health department has more information about pertussis on their website:

dhs.wisconsin.gov/immunization/pertussis.htm.