

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a disease that affects the lungs. Pertussis bacteria are spread from person to person through the air. A person with pertussis develops a severe cough that usually lasts four to six weeks or longer. Pertussis can be very serious, especially in infants.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms of pertussis are similar to a cold: sneezing, a runny nose, 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. Many children will make a high-pitched whooping sound when breathing in after a coughing episode. Whooping is less common in infants and adults. During a coughing spell, the person may vomit. The person's face or lips may look blue from lack of oxygen. The cough is often worse at night.

Between coughing spells, the person seems well, but the illness is exhausting over time. Coughing episodes gradually become less frequent, but may continue for several weeks or months until the lungs heal.

What are the complications of pertussis?

Pertussis in infants is often severe, and 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.

Who gets pertussis?

Anyone of any age can get pertussis. Teenagers and adults account for more than half of reported cases. Cases in school-aged children continue to increase. Older children and adults usually have less severe illness, but they can still spread the disease to infants and young children.

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 up to 7 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.

Tdap vaccine can be given to persons 10 through 64 years of age.

- Adolescents 11-12 years of age should receive Tdap instead of Td (tetanus/diphtheria) before they start middle school
- Adolescents 13-18 years of age should receive Tdap if they have not received a Td booster within the last 5 years