

Pertussis (whooping cough)

Burlington County
Health Department



What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough, another name for pertussis, is a very contagious respiratory disease caused by bacteria, *Bordetella pertussis*. It can be serious for anyone, but life-threatening for newborns and infants.

What are the symptoms?

Pertussis often begins like the common cold, with symptoms such as runny nose, sneezing, and a mild cough. After 1 or 2 weeks, the symptoms become more severe, and include violent coughing spells, vomiting during cough, and a "whoop" sound from trying to gasp for breath. Babies and young children can turn blue while coughing from lack of oxygen. Young babies may also stop breathing for short periods.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread through the air by infectious droplets, while an infected person sneezes, coughs, or talks. Other people nearby can then breathe in the bacteria.

How long does it take to show signs after being exposed to pertussis?

The time between infection and the appearance of symptoms of the disease can be anywhere from 7 to 21 days.

How serious is whooping cough?

This disease is most dangerous for babies and young children. More than half of babies younger than 1 year old who get the disease need care in the hospital. About 1 in 5 babies will get pneumonia. Whooping cough can also result in seizures, brain damage, or death.

What should I do if I suspect my child has pertussis?

Do not send your child to school if you suspect they have pertussis. Remember that your child may have classmates or teachers with infants at home that could develop a serious form of the disease. If you suspect you, your child, or anyone in your family has pertussis, you should consult your physician. A physician will most likely take a specimen by swabbing the back of your throat.

What will happen if my child is diagnosed with pertussis?

If your child is diagnosed with pertussis, your physician will prescribe antibiotics. Since pertussis is contagious, the physician will also prescribe antibiotics to the entire household, regardless of vaccination status. Your physician might also recommend a booster dose of vaccine for your child or other family members. You should also contact the school nurse. It is important that the child remain home from school until 5 days after the start of antibiotics.

How can I prevent pertussis?

Make sure everyone in your household is properly vaccinated. Diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine (DTaP) is generally given to children 6 weeks to 6 years old. Tetanus, Diphtheria and Acellular Pertussis (Tdap) vaccination can be given to adolescents and adults, including those that are pregnant or elderly.

How can I protect my child from whooping cough?

- ✓ Keep newborns away from anyone with cold symptoms or a cough
- ✓ Vaccinate all your children on time
- ✓ Make sure all adults in contact with your child receive a dose of Tdap vaccine

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