

### What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a respiratory infection caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. It is highly contagious and most harmful to infants and children. Most children get pertussis from adults and not from other children. Pertussis is often misdiagnosed, so people do not always realize how common it is. You can get pertussis more than once, and protection from the vaccine fades over time.

### How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis spreads from person to person when an infected person coughs or sneezes and spreads tiny droplets into the air.

### What are the signs and symptoms of pertussis?

They're usually mild at first and appear like those of a common cold and may last 1-2 weeks:

- Runny nose
- Nasal congestion
- Red, watery eyes
- Fever
- Cough

After a week or two, signs and symptoms get worse. Thick mucus builds inside your airways, causing uncontrollable coughing. Severe and prolonged coughing attacks may:

- Cause vomiting
- Cause your face to turn red or blue
- Cause extreme fatigue

- End with a high-pitched “whoop” sound during the next breath of air

### How long after infection do symptoms appear?

It takes about seven to 10 days for signs and symptoms to appear, though it can sometimes take longer and symptoms may last up to 6 weeks.

### Who is most at risk?

It primarily affects children too young to have completed the full course of vaccinations and teenagers and adults whose immunity has faded.

### What type of health problems are caused by pertussis?

Teens and adults often recover from whooping cough with no problems. However, pertussis can cause serious and sometimes deadly complications in infants and young children, especially those who have not received all recommended pertussis vaccines. Complications may include:

- Pneumonia
- Slowed or stopped breathing
- Dehydration or weight loss due to feeding difficulties
- Seizures
- Brain damage

### How is pertussis infection diagnosed?

Sometimes, doctors can diagnose whooping cough by asking about symptoms and listening to the cough. Medical tests may be needed to

confirm the diagnosis. Such tests may include a nose or throat culture, blood test, or a chest X-ray.

### How is pertussis infection treated?

Healthcare providers generally treat pertussis with antibiotics and early treatment is very important. Treatment may make your infection less serious if you start it early, before coughing fits begin. Treatment can also help prevent spreading the disease to close contacts. After three weeks of illness, treatment is unlikely to help.

### How can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis is to get vaccinated; this includes children, teens, adults and pregnant women. Also, keep babies and other people at high risk for pertussis complications away from infected people.

- The DTaP vaccine is given to infants and young children in a series of five shots – at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15 to 18 months, and again at 4 to 6 years of age.
- The Tdap vaccine is recommended for most people 11 years and older who have not previously received it:
  - Adults who are going to be around infants, including those who are 65 and older
  - Adults 65 and older who have not had Tdap previously should get a dose in place of their next Td (tetanus/diphtheria) vaccine, and

- Pregnant women should get one dose of Tdap vaccine during the third trimester of each pregnancy.

### Where can I get more information?

- Your personal healthcare provider
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [American Academy of Pediatrics](#)
- [Mayo Clinic](#)

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