

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough—or pertussis—is a very serious respiratory (in the lungs and breathing tubes) infection caused by the pertussis bacteria. It is most harmful for young infants.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts with the following symptoms:

- Runny or stuffed-up nose
- Sneezing
- Mild cough
- A pause in breathing in infants (apnea)

After 1 to 2 weeks, severe coughing starts. Children may develop a “whooping” sound as they try to breathe and may turn blue from lack of oxygen. Coughing fits can last for up to 10 weeks.

How does whooping cough spread?

Pertussis spreads easily through the air when a person who has pertussis breathes, coughs, or sneezes. A person can spread pertussis from the very beginning of the sickness (cold-like symptoms) and for at least 2 weeks after coughing starts.

Children can catch pertussis from adults, grandparents, or older brothers or sisters who don't know they have the disease. New moms with pertussis can give it to their newborn babies.

Is it serious?

Pertussis is most dangerous for infants and young children, and can even be deadly. Infants younger than 1 year old who have pertussis may:

- Need to be hospitalized
- Develop pneumonia (a serious lung infection)
- Have seizures
- Suffer brain damage

How can I protect my child?

The best way to protect against pertussis is by getting the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTaP) vaccine. Doctors recommend that all children get the vaccine at the following ages:

- 2 months
- 4 months
- 6 months
- 15 through 18 months, and
- 4 through 6 years of age



What are the vaccine side effects?

Most children don't have any side effects from the vaccine. When side effects do occur, they are usually mild, like redness, swelling, and pain from the shot, fever, and vomiting. They happen in about 1 child out of every 4 children who get the shot. More serious side effects are rare but can include:

- A fever over 105 degrees
- Nonstop crying for 3 hours or more
- Seizures (jerking or twitching of the muscles or staring)

For more information about pertussis and the pertussis vaccine, contact your doctor, state or local health department.