

## Fact Sheet

# Pertussis

Also Known as: Whooping Cough



## What is Pertussis?



Pertussis (whooping cough) is a highly contagious respiratory tract infection. In many people, it's marked by a severe hacking cough followed by a high-pitched intake of breath that sounds like "whoop."

Before the vaccine was developed, whooping cough was considered a childhood disease. Now whooping cough primarily affects children too young to have completed the full course of vaccinations and teenagers and adults whose immunity has faded.

Deaths associated with whooping cough are rare but most commonly occur in infants. That's why it's so important for pregnant women, and other people who will have close contact with an infant, to be vaccinated against whooping cough.

## How is it Spread?

Whooping cough is caused by bacteria. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, tiny germ-laden droplets are sprayed into the air and breathed into the lungs of anyone who happens to be nearby.

## Signs and Symptoms

Pertussis (whooping cough) can cause serious illness in infants, children and adults. The disease usually starts with cold-like symptoms and maybe a mild cough or fever. After 1 to 2 weeks, severe coughing can begin. Unlike the common cold, pertussis can become a series of coughing fits that continues for weeks.

In infants, the cough can be minimal or not even present. Infants may have a symptom known as "apnea." Apnea is a pause in the child's breathing pattern. Pertussis is most dangerous for babies. About half of infants younger than 1 year of age who get the disease are hospitalized.

Pertussis can cause violent and rapid coughing, over and over, until the air is gone from the lungs and the forced inhalation causes a loud "whooping" sound. This extreme coughing can cause weakness. In teens and adults, the "whoop" is often not present and the infection is generally milder (less severe) in teens and adults, especially those who have been vaccinated.

Early symptoms can last for 1 to 2 weeks and usually include:

- § Runny nose
- § Low-grade fever (generally minimal throughout the course of the disease)
- § Mild, occasional cough
- § Apnea — a pause in breathing (in infants)

## Diagnosis

Diagnosing whooping cough in its early stages can be difficult because the signs and symptoms resemble those of other common respiratory illnesses, such as a cold, the flu or bronchitis.

Sometimes, doctors can diagnose whooping cough simply 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 and test.** A doctor takes a nose or throat swab or suction sample. The sample is then checked for evidence of the presence of whooping cough bacteria.

## **Treatment**

Antibiotics kill the bacteria causing whooping cough and help speed recovery. Family members may be given preventive antibiotics. Unfortunately, not much is available to relieve the cough. Over-the-counter cough medicines, for instance, have little effect on whooping cough and are discouraged.

Infants are typically hospitalized for treatment because whooping cough is more dangerous for that age group. If a child can't keep down liquids or food, intravenous fluids may be necessary. An infected child may also be isolated from others to prevent the infection from spreading.

Treatment for older children and adults usually can be managed at home.

## **Complications**

Most people recover from whooping cough with no problems. When complications occur, they tend to be side effects of the strenuous coughing, such as:

- § Bruised or cracked ribs
- § Abdominal hernias
- § Broken blood vessels in the skin or the whites of the eyes

In infants — especially those under 6 months of age — complications from whooping cough are more severe and may include:

- § Ear infections
- § Pneumonia
- § Slowed or stopped breathing
- § Dehydration
- § Seizures
- § Brain damage

Because infants and toddlers are at greatest risk of complications from whooping cough, they're more likely to need treatment in a hospital. Complications can be life-threatening for infants less than 6 months old.

## **Prevention**

The best way to prevent whooping cough is with the pertussis vaccine, which doctors often give in combination with vaccines against two other serious diseases — diphtheria and tetanus. Doctors recommend beginning vaccination during infancy.



***For more sources of information on this topic visit:***

ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT [www.scchealth.co](http://www.scchealth.co)

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES [www.michigan.gov/mdhhs](http://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs)

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

THE MAYO CLINIC [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)