



Indiana State
Department of Health
Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts: Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a disease caused by bacteria. It may cause coughing fits that can cause breathing problems. Pertussis can lead to pneumonia (inflammation of lungs), seizures, and sometimes death. Most of these serious problems occur in infants who are less than a year old. Pertussis is generally milder in older children and adults. Pertussis often presents in a cycle, with peaks in pertussis cases every few years. Indiana generally has several hundred reported cases of pertussis every year.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The symptoms of pertussis occur in three stages:

1. During the first stage, symptoms are like a cold: slight fever, sneezing, runny nose and dry cough.
2. During the second stage (about 1-2 weeks later), the cough becomes more intense. There may be short, intense coughing spells followed by a long gasp for air. The coughing fits may be followed by vomiting, nose bleeds, or bluish color to the lips or face.
3. During the third stage, the cough is less intense and less frequent. The cough eventually stops, but this may take several months.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread by contact with nose or throat droplets from an infected person. This can happen when an infected person coughs or sneezes or when an uninfected person touches objects with nose or throat droplets from an infected person. An infected person can spread the disease for up to three weeks from the time the cough begins. However, after five days of antibiotics, an infected person cannot spread pertussis.

Who is at risk for pertussis?

People who haven't received all recommended doses of pertussis vaccines or who have not received pertussis vaccine for several years are at higher risk for pertussis. Occasionally, vaccinated individuals may still get a mild case of pertussis due to waning vaccine effect. Infants who are too young to be fully vaccinated are at greatest risk for severe illness and death from pertussis.

How do I know if I have pertussis?

If you have had close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with pertussis or if you have the symptoms described above, you should talk to your doctor. Your doctor may test you for pertussis.

How is pertussis treated?

Pertussis can be treated with antibiotics. While antibiotics make pertussis less contagious, they do not get rid of the cough unless taken very early in the illness. Everyone who lives in the same house of someone with pertussis should receive antibiotics to prevent spreading pertussis to others. Other people, such as playmates and classmates, might need antibiotics as well.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Keep you and your children up to date with vaccines. The diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DTaP) vaccine is a five dose series for children under 7 years of age. Teens and adults (ages 10 years and older) should also get one dose of Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis) vaccine to protect against pertussis and a booster vaccine every ten years for continued immunity. **Pregnant women should get 1 dose of Tdap during each pregnancy.** It is very important anyone having contact with an infant be fully vaccinated with the correct pertussis vaccine for their age. Tdap can be given no matter how much time has passed since the last dose of tetanus vaccine. Indiana requires that students in grades 6-12 get a single dose of Tdap. See your doctor to decide if you or anyone in your family needs a vaccine against pertussis.

All information presented is intended for public use. More information on pertussis (whooping cough) can be found at:

- <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Pertussis/>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/pertussis/default.htm>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/acip-recs/vacc-specific/tdap-td.html>