

Pertussis Facts

What is pertussis?

- "Whooping cough" or the cough of 100 days
- highly contagious disease involving the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person

Who gets pertussis?

- People of all ages can get pertussis.
- Most cases occur in children under age 5 years, however, there have been more cases occurring in teens and adults.

How is pertussis spread?

- Primarily by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat of infected persons or by contact with airborne droplets of respiratory secretions via coughing or sneezing
- Frequently, older siblings, parents or grandparents may carry the bacteria in their nose and throat and transmit the disease to others in the household.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

- Begins as a mild upper respiratory infection, like a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of numerous rapid coughs followed by a crowing or high-pitched whoop. A thick, clear mucous may be discharged. These coughing episodes are more frequent at night. Adults and immunized children generally have milder symptoms.

How soon after infections do symptoms appear?

- Usually 5 to 10 days but may be as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

- A person can transmit pertussis from 7 days following exposure to 3 weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. A person is no longer considered infectious after completing a 5-day course of antibiotics.

Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

- Yes, for children under age 7 years, there is a combination vaccine called "DTaP" which contains diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis. It is routinely given at 2, 4, 6, 12-15 months and between 4-6 years of age.
- Adolescents and adults should receive one dose of "Tdap" which contains diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

- Single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community.
- Persons with pertussis should stay away from others (especially infants and young children) including staying out of school, work and social gatherings until completion of 5 days of antibiotics.
- Treatment of people who are close contacts of pertussis cases is also an important part of prevention.