

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (also called “whooping cough”) is a highly contagious bacterial infection that causes a persistent cough lasting several weeks or even months. It is caused by a bacterium (germ), *Bordetella pertussis*, which is found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms normally begin 6 to 21 days (average 7 – 10 days) after becoming infected and may last 6 – 10 weeks.

- Early symptoms are similar to a cold: runny nose, sneezing, mild cough, and may include a low-grade fever.
- Within two weeks, the cough may become much worse with fits of coughing that continue for weeks.
- This cough may be followed by a “whooping” gasp sound to breathe in air.
- Coughing is often worse at night and cough medicines usually do not help reduce the cough.
- Between coughing fits, the person often appears to be well.
- Vomiting may occur after a coughing fit.
- An infant’s cough may be minimal with spells of apnea (failure to breathe) or pauses in breathing pattern.

When is pertussis contagious?

Pertussis is most contagious during the early symptoms when a person has a runny nose, but can remain contagious for up to 3 weeks. After completing 5 days of effective antibiotic treatment, a person is no longer contagious.

How is it spread?

- It is spread from person to person when infected people cough, sneeze or talk releasing droplets from their nose or mouth.
- Untreated infected persons can spread the infection to others for several weeks.

Who gets pertussis?

- Anyone can get pertussis, **but infants and young children are at highest risk of life threatening consequences.** Older children and adults may develop milder symptoms, go undiagnosed and then spread the disease to others. **If your infant (under 1 year) is exposed to pertussis please contact their physician.**
- Regardless of vaccination status, a person can have pertussis more than once.

What should I do if I have symptoms?

Contact your healthcare provider.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may diagnose you by your symptoms and/or nasopharyngeal swab for laboratory testing. It is important to remember laboratory tests may be negative even if a patient has pertussis.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat the infected person and their close contacts.

Should people who have been in contact with a person with pertussis be treated?

Preventative treatment (prophylaxis) with an appropriate antibiotic is recommended regardless of age or immunization status for household and other close contacts.

How can I prevent the spread of pertussis?

- Persons with pertussis or other cough illnesses should stay home and away from others, especially expectant mothers, infants, and young children.
- Vaccination can also prevent pertussis:
 - Doses of DTaP vaccine are recommended at 2, 4, 6, and 15 – 18 months of age and 4 – 6 years of age.
 - Adolescents aged 11-18 years should receive a single dose of Tdap if they have completed the recommended childhood DTaP vaccination series.
 - Any adult aged 19 years and older may receive a single dose of Tdap, but it is especially important for those with close contact to infants to do so.
 - Pregnant women should receive a dose of Tdap with each pregnancy; if not received during pregnancy, then immediately post-partum (before leaving hospital).
- Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue and wash hands thoroughly and often.

For more information visit:

- <http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/>
- <http://www.vaccines.gov/diseases/pertussis/>
- www.pertussis.com

Pertussis has major public health implications; please report any pertussis cases to Saint Louis County Department of Public Health by calling: 314-615-1630