

FactSheet

Para Su Información

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis is a contagious, bacterial respiratory disease. Although pertussis may be a mild disease in older children and adults, in younger children this disease can be complicated by pneumonia and occasionally inflammation of the brain. In rare cases pertussis can cause death (especially in children less than 1 year of age).

Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

Yes. Pertussis vaccine (DTaP) is given at 2, 4, 6, and 12 months of age, and at age 4. At least 3-4 doses are necessary to protect a child from pertussis. Due to an increase of pertussis cases in adolescents and adults, the CDC recommends the Tdap vaccine as follows:

1. Adolescents 11 to 18 years of age should receive the Tdap in place of tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccine.
2. Adults should replace the next booster dose of tetanus and diphtheria (Td) vaccine with Tdap.
3. Unvaccinated pregnant women should receive Tdap in the third or late second trimester (after 20 weeks gestation).

It is especially important for adults who live with or care for infants to be vaccinated.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The symptoms of pertussis usually occur in stages. The first stage usually begins like a cold and includes:

- A runny nose
- Sneezing
- Low-grade fever

- Cough
 - The cough lasts 1 to 2 weeks and then becomes worse

The second stage of pertussis includes:

- Uncontrollable coughing spells followed by a whooping noise when a person breathes in.
 - During these severe coughing spells, a person may vomit, or their lips or face may look blue from a lack of oxygen.
 - Between coughing spells, a person may appear well.
 - This stage may last 4 to 6 weeks.

Children and adults partially protected by the vaccine may become infected, but may have a milder illness than infants and very young children. These persons infected with a mild case may not experience any symptoms or have only mild cough, however, they can still transmit the disease to others, including infants too young to be immunized.

Infants younger than 6 months, adolescents and adults, may have a cough that does not include the “whooping” sound.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age, but is most commonly reported in children in the first year of life. Infants and young children usually get the disease from an older brother or sister or an adult who may have a mild illness.

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How is pertussis spread?

- The bacteria which cause pertussis are found in the mouths, noses, and throats of infected people.
- The bacteria are spread in the air by droplets produced during sneezing or coughing.
- Once a person is exposed by inhaling these droplets, it takes 7 to 10 days before the first symptoms appear.

How long can a person spread pertussis?

Pertussis is very contagious during the early stage of the illness and becomes less contagious by the end of three weeks. Antibiotics will shorten the contagious period of the illness.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may suspect pertussis when someone has the symptoms described above.

- A sample of mucus from the back of the nose must be taken during the early stage of the illness in order to grow the bacteria.
 - Laboratory tests can be done on the sample to identify the bacteria.

How is pertussis treated?

- Infants younger than 6 months of age and persons with severe cases often require hospitalization.
- Severe cases may require oxygen and mild sedation to help control coughing spells.

- Antibiotics may make the illness less severe if started in the early stage of the disease.
 - Generally, if a person is exposed to pertussis, specific antibiotics may help prevent the disease.

How can the spread of pertussis be prevented?

- Prompt use of antibiotics in a household with an active case of pertussis is helpful in limiting other cases.
 - If a case occurs in a child attending a childcare facility, antibiotics should be given to household contacts and other close contacts.
- Children who develop symptoms within 14 days of exposure should be excluded from childcare facilities until a diagnosis can be made.

Where can I get more information?

Contact your doctor or the Southern Nevada Health District, Office of Epidemiology at (702) 759-1300.



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