

Pertussis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious (easily spread) respiratory disease caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur in people of all ages, but babies are at greatest risk for getting pertussis and then having serious complications from it, including death. Although adults are less likely than infants to become seriously ill with pertussis, most adults make repeated visits for medical care and miss work, especially when pertussis is not initially considered as a reason for their long-term cough. In addition, adults with pertussis infection are a frequent source of infection to infants with whom they have close contact.

How do people get pertussis?

The bacteria that cause whooping cough spread easily from person to person through the air. When a person with whooping cough sneezes or coughs, they release small particles with the bacteria in them. Other people can then breathe in the bacteria. People can spread the bacteria from the start of symptoms and for at least two weeks after coughing begins.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms of pertussis are like the common cold and include:

- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Runny nose
- Fever

Within two weeks, the cough becomes more serious with episodes of rapid uncontrollable coughing spasms followed by a high pitched “whoop” sound when the person tries to take a breath. The coughing spasm may also be followed by gagging or vomiting. These coughing spells can make breathing, eating, and sleeping very hard. A final recovery stage with coughing may last weeks or months.

However, not everyone with pertussis will cough and many who cough will not “whoop.” Babies may not cough at all. Instead, they may have life-threatening pauses in breathing (apnea) or struggle to breathe. Any time someone is struggling to breathe, it is important to get them to a doctor right away.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A health care provider will look at your signs and symptoms and collect a sample of saliva from the throat for laboratory testing.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

Health care providers generally treat pertussis with antibiotics and early treatment is very important. Treatment may make your infection less serious if you start it early, before coughing fits begin. Treatment can also help prevent spreading the disease to close contacts (people who have spent a lot of time around the infected person).

How can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis among babies, children, teens, pregnant women, and adults is to get vaccinated. Also, keep babies and other people at high risk for pertussis complications away from infected people.

Two vaccines in the United States help prevent whooping cough: DTaP and Tdap. These vaccines also provide protection against [tetanus](#) and [diphtheria](#).

Who should get the pertussis vaccine?

The pertussis vaccine is combined with the diphtheria and tetanus anti-toxin vaccines. The type of combination vaccination that is given depends on the person's age. The Diphtheria, Tetanus and acellular Pertussis (DTaP) vaccine is given to infants and children younger than seven years. Protection from these vaccines decrease over time, so older children and adults are recommended to receive the Tdap vaccine to help increase protection from pertussis.

Babies do not start building their own protection against whooping cough until they get vaccinated at two months old. This leaves babies unprotected in the first months of life when they are at highest risk. For this reason, pregnant persons are recommended to get the Tdap vaccine during the 27th through 36th week of *each* pregnancy to help protect babies from pertussis.

The following graphic shows the pertussis vaccine recommendations for different age groups: [cdc.gov/pertussis/images/pertussis-vacc-all.jpg](https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/images/pertussis-vacc-all.jpg).

Where can I get more information on pertussis?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department localhealth.nj.gov
- NJ Department of Health nj.gov/health/
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/pertussis/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/pertussis/index.html)

This information is intended for education purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.