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 postpartum (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.cdc.gov/pertussis/)
- [www.pertussis.com](http://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

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