

# WHOOPING COUGH

## *Pertussis*

Whooping cough can cause serious illness in people of all ages but is most dangerous for infants.

### CAUSES

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a very contagious respiratory illness caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. The bacteria attach to the cilia (tiny, hair-like extensions) that line part of the upper respiratory system and release toxins that can damage the cilia and cause airways to swell.

### THOSE AT HIGH-RISK OF ILLNESS

Anyone can get pertussis, but it can be more severe for infants and people with weakened immune systems.

Immunizations received during childhood for pertussis may lose effectiveness over time. A pertussis booster may increase protection for vulnerable populations, including older children and adults.

### SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of pertussis usually develop within 5-10 days after exposure to the bacteria. Sometimes symptoms can take as long as three weeks to develop. Early symptoms may last 1-3 weeks and usually include:

- Runny nose or congestion
- Elevated body temperature (99.5-100.4° F)
- Adults: Mild, occasional cough
- Babies and young children: Apnea (life-threatening pauses in breathing) and cyanosis (turning blue or purple)

One to two weeks after the first symptoms start, people with pertussis may develop rapid, violent, and uncontrolled coughing fits. These coughing fits usually last 1-6 weeks, but can last for up to 10 weeks. Coughing fits generally worsen as the duration of the illness continues.

### PREVENTION

#### PREEXPOSURE

Two kinds of vaccines used in the U.S. help protect against pertussis, both of which also provide protection against other diseases. Diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (DTaP) and the tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (Tdap) are given at a variety of life stages. The vaccine reduces the risk of serious illness, but does not provide significant protection against infection or transmission of the bacteria. People who have received the vaccine appear to transmit pertussis as often as those who have not received the vaccine.

Pertussis is referred to as whooping cough because of the “whooping” sound that people can make when gasping for air during a coughing fit.

The infection is generally milder in teens and adults than in babies and children, especially those who have received an immunization to protect against pertussis.

# WHOOING COUGH (PERTUSSIS)

Talk to your health care provider about what immunizations are most appropriate for you.

## POSTEXPOSURE

If your health care provider diagnoses you with pertussis, your entire household may be prescribed antibiotics to prevent the spread of illness.

## TRANSMISSION

The bacteria spreads easily from person to person through the air. When an individual who has pertussis sneezes or coughs, they can release small particles of bacteria into the air.

Individuals can remain contagious for weeks. People can spread the bacteria from the start of the very first symptoms and for at least two weeks after coughing begins. Some people have mild symptoms and don't know they have whooping cough, but they can still spread the bacteria to others.

## TESTING

Health care providers diagnose pertussis by considering exposure risk, along with the following:

- History of typical signs and symptoms
- Physical examination
- Laboratory test of a mucus sample from the back of the throat
- Blood test

## TREATMENT

**Treating pertussis early can make the illness less serious and help prevent spreading the bacteria to others.**

Health care providers generally treat pertussis with antibiotics. Take the antibiotics exactly as prescribed by your health care provider.

- Do not take cough medicines unless your health care provider recommends them.
- Keep your home free from irritants that may trigger coughing, such as smoke, dust, and chemical fumes.
- Use a clean, cool mist humidifier to help loosen mucus and soothe the cough.
- Eat small meals every few hours to help prevent vomiting.
- Hydrate with water, juices, soups, and/or fruits to prevent dehydration. Report signs of dehydration, such as decreased urination or wet diapers, to your health care provider immediately.