

WHOOPING COUGH (Pertussis)

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is an upper respiratory infection caused by the *Bordetella pertussis* or *B. parapertussis* bacteria.

What causes Pertussis?

Pertussis is caused by *Bordetella pertussis*, a gram-negative coccobacillus.

How do people get Pertussis?

Pertussis occurs through direct contact with discharges from respiratory mucous membranes of infected persons.

When an infected person sneezes or coughs, tiny droplets containing the bacteria move through the air, and the disease is easily spread from person to person. Initial symptoms, similar to the common cold, usually develop about a week after exposure to the bacteria. Severe episodes of coughing start about 10 to 12 days later. In children, the coughing often ends with a “whoop” noise. The sound is produced when the patient tries to take a breath. The whoop is rare in patients under 6 months of age and in adults. Coughing spells may lead to vomiting. Pertussis should always be considered when vomiting occurs with coughing. In infants, choking spells are common.

The infection usually lasts 6 weeks.

Whooping cough can affect people of any age. Before vaccines were widely available, the disease was most common in infants and young children. Now that most children are immunized before entering school, the higher percentage of cases is seen among adolescents and adults.

Signs and Symptoms

- Runny nose
- Slight fever (102°F or lower)
- Severe, repeated coughs that:
 - Make breathing difficult
 - Result in vomiting
 - Produce a high-pitched “whooping” sound when a person takes a breath
 - Cause short loss of consciousness
- Diarrhea
- Choking spells in infants

How is Pertussis diagnosed?

The initial diagnosis is usually based on the symptoms. However, when the symptoms are not obvious, pertussis may be difficult to diagnose.

To know for sure, the health care provider may take a sample of mucus from the nose and send it to a lab to test it for pertussis. While this can offer an accurate diagnosis, the test results take time, and treatment is usually started before the results are ready.

Some patients may have a complete blood count that shows large numbers of lymphocytes.

How soon after exposure do symptoms occur?

Symptoms generally appear within 7-10 days of exposure, but can appear up to 21 days after cough appears.

What is the treatment for Pertussis?

If started early enough, antibiotics such as erythromycin, zithromax, clarithromycin, and amoxicillin. If these antibiotics are started early enough they can shorten the duration of the infection.

Chemoprophylaxis, (prevention of illness after close exposure to an infected individual) is needed for household contacts and close face to face contacts of pertussis cases. This generally means within three feet. Prophylaxis is not necessary for casual or brief contact.

Good hand washing, tissue use and disposal are essential. Infected persons need to be at home for at least the first five days of treatment.

When to contact Health Services or your health care provider:

Call Health Services at 563-588-6374 or your health care provider if you develop symptoms of pertussis, or have had a close contact with an infected individual.

Contact your physician if you have any questions or problems.