



The Facts about Pertussis ("Whooping Cough")

What is pertussis and the symptoms?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a contagious infection that affects the lungs and breathing passages. The dry cough can last one to six weeks or more and cause coughing fits and trouble breathing. Pertussis usually starts with cold-like symptoms, such as coughing, sneezing, and a runny nose. It's often diagnosed after a cough lasts more than one to two weeks.

The cough is usually not harmful to adults and older children, but can be dangerous for babies. Sometimes children have a hard time catching their breath. It's not unusual for children to spit up, vomit, or be exhausted after coughing. Infants might also have breathing problems or develop serious medical conditions such as pneumonia, seizures, and brain damage.

Pertussis is also known as "whooping cough" because of the "whoop" sound children or other patients sometimes make during coughing.

How do people get pertussis?

A bacteria causes pertussis and it's usually spread by coughing or sneezing when people are in close contact. Infants often get pertussis from older brothers and sisters, parents, or other caregivers who might not even know they have it.

How can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to protect adults, children, and babies from pertussis is to get the recommended vaccine and booster shots, which are safe.

Vaccines are first given at two months of age, then again at four, six, and 15-18 months, and again between four to six years old. A booster shot also is recommended for children by age 11. **In Rhode Island, Grade 7 students are required to get this booster.** Teens and adults who haven't yet received their boosters should get one as soon as possible. When in doubt about whether you're up-to-date on your shots, speak with a doctor to find out what's best for you and your family.

Keep anyone with a cough away from babies and newborns. Also make sure everyone who comes in contact with infants is up-to-date on their shots.

How is pertussis treated?

See a doctor or the school nurse when pertussis symptoms first appear. If you or your child has trouble breathing, seek medical attention right away.

Tell the doctor or school nurse if you or your child has been around others with a cough or cold, or if you've heard about others with pertussis in your community.

Your doctor might prescribe an antibiotic treatment to help speed up recovery and to prevent the disease from spreading to others.

Babies often are hospitalized when treated for pertussis.