

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

What is Whooping Cough?

Whooping cough, which is also known as Pertussis, is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by a bacteria. Whooping cough is a very serious disease and can lead to permanent disability and even death of infants. It produces uncontrollable, violent coughing fits that produce a “whoop-like” noise and make it difficult to breathe.

- Nearly 75% of whooping cough cases reported in the U.S. are in children.
- More than half of infants less than 12 months of age who have whooping cough require hospitalization.
- Vaccinating against whooping cough is more than 90% effective at preventing the disease.

What are its symptoms?

Symptoms of whooping cough are similar to the common cold, including:

- a runny or stuffy nose,
- cough,
- sneeze,
- low-grade fever (99 to 101°F), and
- diarrhea.

Coughing episodes don't usually start until 10-12 days after these symptoms. Children will make the hallmark whooping sound in between coughing spells as they try to breathe in between coughs, although young infants and adults may not. Coughing episodes are more common at night.

How does it spread?

Whooping cough is spread person to person when germs of an infected person are aerosolized when they cough or sneeze. These germs float through the air, contaminating surfaces and infecting others. An infected person can be contagious for up to 2-3 weeks from the first signs of illness through the beginning of the coughing spells phase.

What are some complications associated with it?

Some examples of complications associated with Whooping Cough include:

- Choking:
 - Vomiting can occur during coughing fits, and a child may lose consciousness. It is common for infants to choke on their vomit during a coughing spell.

- Pneumonia:
 - Pneumonia is common in children with whooping cough, because their immune systems are already weakened by the disease. Pneumonia is the most common cause of death of children with whooping cough.
- Brain Inflammation:
 - In rare cases, inflammation of the brain can occur, which can lead to seizures, mental retardation, and deafness.
- Pregnancy Complications:
 - Women who are pregnant may infect their newborn baby with whooping cough if they deliver the baby while infected.

How do I treat it?

If you suspect you or your child has whooping cough, contact your doctor immediately. A doctor will prescribe antibiotics to treat pertussis. Be sure to complete the full dosage prescribed by your doctor. After 5 days of treatment, a person is no longer considered to be contagious. Do not take any over-the-counter cough medications or suppressants since they are not helpful.

How do I prevent it?

Pertussis is a vaccine-preventable disease. The Pediatric Diphtheria, Tetanus, and Pertussis (DTaP) vaccine is part of the recommended childhood immunizations and aids in protecting children from pertussis infections. For optimal protection against whooping cough, a child needs five doses of DTaP - one dose at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15 to 18 months, and lastly between 4 and 6 years of age. Adults are advised to get a booster vaccine (TDaP) every 10 years to help prevent the spread of whooping cough to young children.

Women who are pregnant should ideally receive a TDaP booster between 27 and 36 weeks of pregnancy, but they can receive it at any time during pregnancy.

During a whooping cough epidemic, unimmunized individuals should not attend school, work, or attend public gatherings due to their increased likelihood of acquiring this severe illness.