



Whooping Cough[☎]

(Pertussis)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a very contagious disease caused by bacteria. It is a vaccine-preventable disease that is usually mild in vaccinated children and adults but can often be serious in young infants. All children attending child care facilities and entering schools are required to be immunized against pertussis.

Who is at risk for pertussis?

Everyone is at risk for pertussis, but infants and unvaccinated children are at the highest risk for developing severe complications from pertussis.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

There are three stages of pertussis. The first stage (which lasts one to two weeks) begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever and cough that slowly gets worse. The second stage consists of uncontrolled coughing spells (paroxysms) and sometimes a whooping noise (in young infants) when the person inhales. During severe coughing spells, a person may gag, vomit or become blue in the face from lack of air. Between coughing spells, the person often appears to be well. The coughing spells may be so bad that it is hard to eat, drink or breathe. During this stage, infants may have apnea (failure to breath) and/or cyanosis (bluish tinge to the skin). This coughing stage may last for six or more weeks. The final stage is when symptoms gradually improve over weeks to months.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually seven to 10 days but may be as short as five days and as long as 21 days.

How is pertussis spread?

The bacteria that cause pertussis live in the nose, mouth and throat and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. Other people nearby can then inhale the germs. Infants often get pertussis from older children or adults.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

Pertussis is contagious from the onset of cold-like symptoms until three weeks after cough onset.

How is a person diagnosed?

A health-care provider will diagnose pertussis by collecting a sample of mucus from the back of the nose. Laboratory tests are then performed on the sample. Pertussis is difficult to diagnose in adolescents and adults without laboratory testing because the disease can mimic bronchitis in those age groups.

What is the treatment?

Infants may need hospitalization and/or supportive care. Antibiotics will help to prevent transmission of the illness to others and may possibly reduce the severity of disease if given early in the course of the illness. Those treated with antibiotics are contagious until five days of treatment are completed. Anyone who is exposed to pertussis also should be given antibiotics to prevent themselves from being contagious if they develop the disease, even if they were vaccinated. In addition, it is helpful to get plenty of rest and fluids.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No. Someone who has previously had pertussis can develop the disease again in the future. It is unknown how long immunity to pertussis lasts.

Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities if they have pertussis?

Yes. People who have pertussis should be excluded from activities until five days of antibiotic treatment have been completed. People with pertussis who do not take antibiotics should be excluded until 21 days after cough onset. Symptomatic contacts (contacts with a cough) of pertussis cases also should be excluded from activities until five days of antibiotic treatment are completed.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis disease?

There are two vaccines that protect against pertussis. All pertussis vaccines also protect against diphtheria and tetanus. The childhood vaccine is called DTaP and the vaccine for older children, adolescents, and adults is called Tdap. Generally a child will receive five doses of DTaP, given in a series starting at 2 months of age with a final dose prior to starting elementary school. The childhood DTaP vaccine is not given to people age 7 or older. North Dakota state law requires all children attending early childhood facilities or schools to be vaccinated against pertussis. It is recommended that adolescents receive one dose of Tdap at age 11 or 12 to protect themselves against pertussis. Tdap is required for entry into middle school. All adults should also receive a dose of Tdap if they have not previously received one. This is especially important for those who have significant contact with infants such as child care providers and new or expecting parents.

Routine handwashing also may prevent the spread of pertussis.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available at www.ndhealth.gov/disease or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

This disease is a reportable condition. As mandated by North Dakota law, any incidence of this disease shall be reported to the North Dakota Department of Health.

Resource: American Academy of Pediatrics. [Pertussis]. In: Pickering LK, ed. *Red Book: 2009 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 28th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2009: 504-519.

