



## **PERTUSSIS**

### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

#### **What is pertussis?**

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a very contagious disease caused by bacteria (germs). Pertussis is usually mild in older children and adults, but it often causes serious problems in very young children (i.e., infants less than 1 year of age).

#### **What are the symptoms of pertussis?**

Pertussis symptoms have two stages. 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 is marked by uncontrolled coughing spells and a whooping noise (in young children) when the person inhales. During severe coughing spells, a person may 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 for babies to eat, drink or breathe. This coughing stage may last for six or more weeks. Adults, teens and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that mimic bronchitis or asthma. Some infants may only have apnea (failure to breath) and/or cyanosis.

#### **How is pertussis spread?**

The germs 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. Touching a tissue or sharing a cup used by someone with pertussis also can spread the disease. The first symptoms usually appear about seven to 10 days after a person is exposed. Infants often get pertussis from older children or adults. Pertussis is contagious from the onset of cold symptoms until three weeks after cough onset.

#### **Who gets pertussis?**

Pertussis is most serious among infants less than a year old, but anyone can get it. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in very young infants, teens and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough. Adults and teenagers are often carriers of the disease.

#### **Is pertussis dangerous?**

It can be, especially for infants. Pertussis can cause breathing problems (apnea), pneumonia, and swelling of the brain (encephalopathy), which can lead to seizures and brain damage. Pertussis also can cause death (rarely), especially in very young infants.

### **How is pertussis diagnosed?**

A doctor may think a patient has pertussis because of the symptoms, but a sample of mucus must be taken from the back of the nose for testing. The sample is then tested by a laboratory to determine whether the patient has pertussis.

### **How is pertussis treated?**

Antibiotics can make the disease milder if they are started early enough and will help to prevent transmission of the illness to others. 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 the disease, even if they were vaccinated. In addition, it is helpful to get plenty of rest and fluids. Treatment for young children may include supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen and mild sedation to help the child during the prolonged period of coughing.

### **How long should people who have pertussis be excluded from activities?**

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 of pertussis cases also should be excluded from activities until five days of antibiotic treatment are completed.

### **Can pertussis be prevented?**

Yes, there are vaccines to prevent pertussis. The childhood vaccine is given along with diphtheria and tetanus in the same shot (called DTaP). Five doses of vaccine, given in a series starting at 2 months of age, are needed to protect a child from pertussis. The vaccine works for most children, but it wears off after a number of years. The childhood DTaP vaccine is not given to persons 7 years of age or older. North Dakota state law requires all children attending early childhood facilities or schools to be vaccinated against pertussis. The adolescent vaccine also is given along with diphtheria and tetanus (Tdap). It is recommended that adolescents receive one dose of Tdap at 11 to 12 years of age to protect themselves against pertussis.

**Contact the North Dakota Department of Health Immunization Program at 800.472.2180 for more information about pertussis.**