

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a very contagious respiratory disease caused by bacteria. Pertussis is known for uncontrollable, violent coughing which often makes it hard to breathe. After fits of coughing, someone with pertussis often needs to take deep breaths which result in a “whooping” sound. It is usually mild in older children and adults, but can be serious, even deadly, for babies less than one year old.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Early symptoms of pertussis can last for 1 to 2 weeks. They are like the common cold and include:

- A pause in breathing (apnea)
- Mild, occasional cough
- Runny nose
- Low-grade fever

After 1 to 2 weeks as the disease progresses, more recognizable symptoms of pertussis appear and include:

- Fits of many, rapid coughs followed by a high-pitched “whoop”
- Vomiting during or after coughing fits
- Very tired after coughing fits

Coughing fits can last for up to 10 weeks or more. As the illness continues, coughing fits become more common and occur more often at night.

Recovery can be slow. Over time the coughing fits become milder and less common. However, coughing fits can return with other respiratory infections for many months after pertussis infection started.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis spreads easily through the air when a person who has the disease breathes, coughs, or sneezes. People can also become sick if they come in contact with the mucus or saliva (spit) from an infected person.

Almost everyone who is not immune to whooping cough will get sick if exposed to it. A person can spread the disease from the very beginning of the sickness (when he has cold-like symptoms) and for at least 2 weeks after coughing starts.

A child can catch whooping cough from adults, grandparents, or older siblings who don't know they have the disease. New moms with pertussis can give it to their newborn babies.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur in people of all ages. Pertussis is most severe in infants less than one year old and more than half of these infants who get the disease must be hospitalized. Each year between 10,000 to 40,000 new cases are reported and up to 20 deaths.

Older children and adults can also get pertussis as protection against the disease decreases over time, but it is usually not as serious. Many infants who get pertussis catch it from their older siblings, or from their parents or other caregiver who might not even know they have the disease.

Is pertussis dangerous?

It can be, especially for infants. Pertussis can cause breathing problems, pneumonia and swelling of the brain (encephalitis), which can lead to seizures and brain damage. Pertussis can also cause death, especially in very young infants, but this is rare. In older children, teens and adults, the disease is milder but may last for weeks or months.

How is pertussis treated?

A doctor will prescribe a treatment plan that is appropriate for the patient. Possible treatments may include antibiotics or oxygen and medicine to help control severe coughing spells. Anyone who has been exposed to pertussis should see their doctor, even if they were vaccinated.

Can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis among all age groups is to get vaccinated. The recommended pertussis vaccine is called DTaP which protects against three diseases: diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis. Keeping babies away from infected or unvaccinated people is important.

Vaccine protection fades overtime. A booster shot is available and recommended every 10 years.

Can reinfection happen?

Once someone gets pertussis, their body will have a natural defense to future infections. However, this natural immunity fades overtime, just like with the vaccine. Since natural immunity fades and does not offer lifelong protection, vaccination is still recommended for those who have had pertussis in the past.

Where can I get more information?

- Your primary care provider
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609)265-5548 or www.co.burlington.nj.us/health
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: www.cdc.gov/pertussis
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) Website at: www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/pertussis.shtml