

Pertussis: What Parents Need to Know

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a persistent cough illness. Anyone of any age can get pertussis.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms of pertussis are similar to a cold. After a week or two, the cough worsens and may occur in sudden, uncontrollable bursts. Sometimes coughing will lead to vomiting or a high-pitched whoop sound when breathing in. Persons with pertussis may seem well between coughing spells. These spells become less frequent over time, but may continue for several weeks or months until the lungs heal.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis bacteria are spread through droplets produced during coughing or sneezing. These droplets don't travel very far through the air and usually only infect persons nearby.

When and for how long can a person spread pertussis?

Persons with pertussis can spread it to others for the first 3 weeks of coughing or until they complete 5 days of antibiotic treatment, whichever occurs first.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent pertussis. Vaccination against pertussis is part of the regularly recommended childhood vaccines. A pertussis vaccine booster is also recommended for adolescents and adults. Ask your health care provider for more information. Persons who

have been vaccinated for pertussis may still get pertussis disease, but will generally have a milder illness.

Antibiotics are sometimes recommended to prevent pertussis in close contacts of someone with pertussis, such as household members.

Is there a lab test for pertussis?

Yes, but only if someone has symptoms. Most commonly, the nasal passage is swabbed, and the swab is examined for the presence of pertussis bacteria. Sometimes a test using blood will be done to look for an immune response.

How long should someone with pertussis stay home from child care, school, work, etc.?

Persons with pertussis should stay home from child care, school, work, and other activities until they have finished 5 days of antibiotics, unless they have already been coughing for 3 or more weeks.

More tips

- Wash your hands often.
- Stay at home if you are ill.
- When coughing, cover your mouth with a tissue or cough into your sleeve.

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