

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

WHAT IS IT?

- ✓ Pertussis (also called “whooping cough”) is a highly contagious bacterial infection that causes a severe cough.

SYMPTOMS

- ✓ Symptoms appear 6 to 21 (average 7-10) days after exposure to an infected person.
- ✓ Pertussis may start with cold symptoms or simply a dry cough followed by episodes of severe coughing. Fever is absent or mild.
- ✓ **Gagging or vomiting** may occur after severe coughing spells. Cough may be worse at night.
- ✓ The person may look and feel healthy between coughing episodes.
- ✓ Immunized school children, adolescents, and adults often have milder illness than young children.
- ✓ Infants with pertussis may not develop a severe cough. They may only have a mild cough, decreased feeding, and may have difficulty breathing or turn bluish.

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

- ✓ Pertussis is spread through droplets from the mouth and nose when a person with pertussis coughs, sneezes, or talks.
- ✓ Untreated, persons with pertussis can spread the infection for several weeks.
- ✓ Adults and older children with unrecognized pertussis often spread the infection to others, including young children.

WHO GETS IT?

- ✓ Anyone who is exposed to the bacteria can get pertussis.
- ✓ Pertussis vaccine prevents severe disease in young infants, but even a vaccinated person can get pertussis infection.
- ✓ Pertussis occurs in older children and adults because protection from the vaccine (DTP or DTaP) lasts only 5-10 years after the last dose.

WHO IS AT GREATEST RISK?

- ✓ Infants less than one year old are considered at **high** risk for complications of pertussis, including hospitalization, pneumonia, convulsions, and rarely, brain damage or death.

- ✓ Unimmunized or partly immunized children are also at higher risk for pertussis infection and severe disease.
- ✓ Pregnant women with pertussis near the time of delivery may spread it to their newborns.
- ✓ Persons who have close contact with pregnant women, infants, or health care workers can spread pertussis to these high risk individuals.
- ✓ Health care workers with pertussis who have face-to-face patient contact can spread pertussis to their patients and other health care staff.

TREATMENT

- ✓ Treatment is most effective early in the disease. A health care provider must prescribe an antibiotic active against pertussis.
- ✓ Persons treated with antibiotics are no longer contagious after the first 5 days of appropriate antibiotic treatment have been completed.

PREVENTION

- ✓ Pertussis vaccine is included in DTaP and the new Tdap vaccine for adolescents and adults (available since 2006).
 - Before age 7, children should get 5 doses of the DTaP vaccine.
 - Doses are usually given at 2, 4, 6, and 15-18 months of age and 4 - 6 years of age.
 - The 4th dose may be given as early as 12 months of age.
 - Tdap should be given as a single booster dose to 11-64 year old individuals.
- ✓ Persons with cough illnesses should avoid contact with infants and expectant mothers, including visiting or working in labor, delivery, and nursery areas of hospitals and in child care settings.
- ✓ If you live or have close contact with someone who has pertussis, you should take antibiotics to prevent pertussis – contact your health care provider.

**Report all King County cases to
Public Health by calling (206) 296-4774.**

Available in alternate formats.