



Weill Cornell Medical College

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Patient Education:

Whooping Cough

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Keyword(s): pertussis;whooping cough;coughing;infectious diseases;respiratory tract infection;URI;Bordetella pertussis infection;B pertussis infection;Bordetella parapertussis infectionandB parapertussis infection

Learn about the symptoms of and treatments description for whooping cough, as well as vaccines to prevent the disease.

Overview

Vaccination Matters: Help Protect Families from Whooping Cough is a public health initiative by the American Academy of Family Physicians. It's designed to help people understand more about the importance of whooping cough vaccination for adolescents and adults. By visiting the links below, you can learn more about the disease, review findings from a recent survey about whooping cough, and hear from someone who experienced the illness.

At your next doctor's visit, talk about whooping cough, and ask about the Tdap vaccine to help protect you and your family.

- [Survey Fact Sheet](#)(1-page PDF.[About PDFs](#)) – Review findings from a recent survey of adults about whooping cough.
- [1-page Brochure](#)(1-page PDF.[About PDFs](#)) – Content in this print-ready, color brochure is the same as the content on these web pages.

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough, also called pertussis, is a respiratory tract infection.

Symptoms

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

Whooping cough usually starts like a cold and then turns into a bad cough over time. The cough comes in bursts and can make you cough for several minutes at a time. After you cough, you might make a "whooping" sound when you catch your breath. Very young children are more likely to make the whooping sound than older children and adults. You might vomit after coughing, or stop breathing for a few seconds, and your face might turn blue or red from the effort. You might cough more at night.

Causes & Risk Factors

What causes it?

Bacteria (germs) cause whooping cough. Whooping cough is highly contagious, which means other people can easily catch it from you.

Whooping cough bacteria are released into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. You can get whooping cough if you breathe in these bacteria. You can also get it if you touch a surface (such as someone's hand) that is coated with the bacteria.

You should see your doctor if you think you have whooping cough or if you have been around someone who might have it.

Diagnosis & Tests

How can my doctor tell if I have it?

Whooping cough usually starts like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing and maybe a mild cough or fever. But after 1-2 weeks, you can have severe attacks of coughing that can be a problem for another 1-6 weeks. Your doctor may ask you what your cough sounds like and what happens after you cough. Your doctor may want to listen to your cough.

You may need special tests to tell for sure if you have whooping cough. In one test, your doctor will swab the inside of your nose or your throat and the swab is then sent to a

laboratory. Your doctor may also want to take a chest X-ray or a blood sample.

Treatment

What should I do if I have whooping cough?

Your doctor will most likely prescribe antibiotics to make the cough go away faster, and to help stop the disease from spreading to other people. Because whooping cough is so contagious, your doctor may also prescribe antibiotics for your whole family so that it doesn't spread further.

People who have whooping cough can spread the infection to others, especially infants and children. They should stay at home and avoid contact with other people. Babies younger than 1 year who have whooping cough may need to stay in the hospital because whooping cough can lead to pneumonia and other problems.

You may cough on and off for up to 6 weeks, even with medicine, and you may need to miss time at work or school. Your doctor can tell you when it's okay to go back to work or school.

Unfortunately, over-the-counter medications for coughing will not help with whooping cough. You should try to get plenty of rest, and drink plenty of fluids like water or soups so that you don't get dehydrated. You can try using a cool-mist humidifier or taking a warm bath or shower to help clear the lungs and make breathing easier. Also stay away from tobacco smoke, lit fireplaces or other areas where the air may not be clean.

Prevention

What can I do to prevent whooping cough?

[Vaccination](#) against whooping cough is part of the normal early childhood shots and boosters that children get before grade school. Children aren't adequately protected until they've had at least three shots, which is why very young children are more at-risk. A total of 5 shots is recommended for children by age 6. Protection from the childhood whooping cough vaccines begins to wear off 5-10 years after vaccination.

Health experts, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Family Physicians, recommend that most teens and adults get the [Tdap](#) booster vaccination for continued protection against whooping cough if they have not been vaccinated or if their shots are not up to date. Ask your doctor to make sure your vaccinations are up to date.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- How did I get whooping cough?
- Should my family take antibiotics in case they got whooping cough from me?
- My child has whooping cough. Will he/she need to go to the hospital?
- Is there any medicine I can take for my cough?
- How long should I stay home from work? How long should I keep my child out of school/day care?
- What is the right treatment for me?
- My teenager hasn't been vaccinated against whooping cough. Should he/she get the vaccination or a booster shot?
- I'm having trouble sleeping because of the cough. Is there anything I can do to make myself more comfortable?
- Should I stay away from my family until my cough is better?
- How long will I be contagious?

Pertussis: A Disease Affecting All Ages by DS Gregory, M.D. (08/01/06, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20060801/420.html>)