

# Pertussis

March 2009

## What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. The infection can cause a prolonged cough. About 350 to 1000 cases are reported each year in Washington. Information on the number of cases reports each year is available at:

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/notify/nc/incidence/pertussis.pdf>

## How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread mainly when infected people cough or sneeze, expelling droplets that contain the bacteria. Infants are often infected by older siblings or adults with mild or unrecognized disease.

## Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Severe illness is more common in young children who have not been immunized. Older children, adolescents or adults who have been immunized often have milder symptoms. It is important to consider a diagnosis of pertussis in older children, adolescents, and adults with persistent coughs so they do not pass the infection to infants and young children.

## What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially, symptoms resemble those of a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Within two weeks, the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of many rapid coughs followed by a crowing or high pitched whoop. Thick, clear mucus may be discharged. These episodes may recur for one to two months, and are more frequent at night.

Young children who have not been immunized have the most severe symptoms. Infants less than six months of age, adolescents and adults often do not have the characteristic whoop. Therefore, a person with a cough that lasts more than a week without improvement should see a health care provider to ensure the cough is not due to pertussis.

Young infants are at highest risk for complications. Complications include pneumonia, ear infection, loss of appetite, brain disorders, and death. Adolescents and adults may also experience complications such as pneumonia, trouble sleeping, urine leakage, and broken ribs.

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## How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually begin seven to ten days after exposure but can appear in as few as five or as many as 21 days.

## How is pertussis diagnosed?

Pertussis is diagnosed by taking a swab from deep inside the nose. *B. pertussis* bacteria can be grown from the swab or a genetic test can detect the presence of the bacteria.

## How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat pertussis. After five days of treatment, a person is no longer contagious even if he or she is still coughing.

## What can be done to prevent pertussis?

The best way to prevent pertussis is to get vaccinated. A vaccine is available for both children and adults. It is important to maintain a high level of immunization in a community in order to prevent outbreaks. For details on the pertussis vaccines, see:

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/immunize/vaccine/dtap/default.htm>  
<http://www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/immunize/vaccine/tdap/default.htm>

People who are at high risk for severe disease or have close contact with those at high risk for severe disease are usually given antibiotics if they were in close contact with a pertussis case.

People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from young children and infants until properly treated.

For more information, contact:

Your [local health department](#) ( [www.doh.wa.gov/LHJMap/LHJMap.htm](http://www.doh.wa.gov/LHJMap/LHJMap.htm) ) or Communicable Disease Epidemiology at (206) 418-5500 or toll-free 877-539-4344.