

Pertussis

Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention

An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

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What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is caused by bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. Pertussis can be very serious, especially in infants.

What are the signs of pertussis?

The first signs of pertussis are similar to a cold (sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever, and a cough). After one or two weeks, the cough gets worse. For example:

- The cough occurs in sudden, uncontrollable bursts where one cough follows the next without a break for breath.
- Many children will make a high-pitched whooping sound when breathing in after a coughing episode. Whooping is less common in infants and adults.
- After a coughing spell, the person may throw up.
- The person may look blue in the face and have a hard time breathing.
- The cough is often worse at night.
- Between coughing spells, the person seems well, but the illness is exhausting over time.
- Over time, coughing spells become less frequent, but may continue for several weeks or months.

How do you catch pertussis?

Pertussis is spread from person to person through the air. For example a person may catch pertussis by standing close (less than 3 feet away) to an infected person who is coughing or sneezing. A person has to breathe in droplets from an infected person to get sick. People can spread the disease in the first three weeks that they are coughing.

What are the complications of pertussis?

Pertussis in infants is often severe, and infants are more likely than older children or adults to develop complications. The most common complication of pertussis is bacterial pneumonia. Rare complications include seizures, inflammation of the brain, and death.

Who gets pertussis?

Anyone of any age can get pertussis. It is most common in teenagers and adults, but cases in school-aged children continue to occur. Older children and adults usually have less severe illness, but they can still spread the disease to infants and young children.

Is there a treatment for pertussis?

Pertussis can be treated with antibiotics, but treatment may not cure the coughing right away. Treatment is important to prevent spreading the disease to others. If treatment is started early, it may lessen the symptoms of illness. Cough may continue for many weeks after treatment particularly if treatment isn't started until late in the illness. Pertussis bacteria die off naturally after three weeks of coughing. If antibiotics are not started within that time, they are no longer recommended.

Antibiotics can also be given to close contacts of persons with pertussis to prevent them from getting sick. It is important for everyone to take all of the medicine they are given by their healthcare provider.

When and for how long can a person spread pertussis?

Pertussis is most likely to spread to others early in the illness. Persons with pertussis can no longer spread the disease once they have completed 5 days of treatment with antibiotics. However, persons with pertussis who do not take antibiotics can spread the disease during the first three weeks they are coughing.

Is there a lab test for pertussis?

Yes. To test for pertussis, your healthcare provider may insert a swab (like a long q-tip) into your nose. The lab will test the material on the swab to see if they can find the bacteria that causes pertussis.

Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

Yes. There are two pertussis vaccines (DTaP and Tdap). Both vaccines are given in combination with tetanus and diphtheria.

- Children under age 7 should get 5 DTaP shots. These are given at ages 2, 4, 6, 12-15 months and 4-6 years.
- Tdap vaccine can be given to persons 10–64 years old.
 - Adolescents should get 1 shot of Tdap at 11-12 years of age.
 - Adolescents 13-18 years old should receive Tdap if they have not received a tetanus booster within the last 5 years.
 - Adults should receive Tdap in place of the tetanus booster especially if they care for infants less than 12 months of age, are a healthcare worker, or are elderly.

Children who are vaccinated against pertussis may still get the disease, but will generally have milder illness. Protection from the vaccine goes away over time so talk to your healthcare provider to find out when it is time for another shot.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Vaccinate all children on time. This is the best way to prevent pertussis.

Other ways to prevent pertussis are to:

- Avoid close contact with others who are sick or coughing
- Wash your hands often
- Stay at home if you are ill
- Cover your cough with a tissue or cough into your sleeve
- See your healthcare provider if you have signs of pertussis or have been in close contact with someone who has pertussis.

Why did my healthcare provider tell me to stay home for 5 days?

It takes 5 days for the antibiotics to work. You can still spread pertussis to others until you take 5 days of antibiotics.

What will happen if I do not want to take the antibiotics?

If you do not take the antibiotics, you will need to stay away from others for 3 weeks after you start coughing. This includes staying home from daycare, school or work.

Pertussis in Maine

In Maine, pertussis is most common among adolescents followed by infants younger than 1 year of age who are too young to have received all their shots. Pertussis has been reported in all 16 counties in Maine and outbreaks have occurred, particularly among school-aged children. For more specific and up to date information on the number of pertussis cases reported in Maine, please visit the Maine CDC website: <http://www.mainepublichealth.gov> and refer to the Infectious Epidemiology Program Documents.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Immunization Program by calling (207) 287-3746 [TTY Line (888) 706-3876] or visiting the website <http://www.immunizeme.org>. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> – is another excellent source of health information.