

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a contagious and fairly common bacterial infection that causes a range of illnesses, from mild cough to severe disease. It is caused by the bacterium, *Bordetella pertussis*.

Undoubtedly, it is under reported as many infections in older children and adults are not recognized.

How is pertussis spread?

Respiratory (droplet) route: Contact with large droplets that form when a child talks, coughs, or sneezes. These droplets can land on or be rubbed into the eyes, nose or mouth. The droplets don't stay in the air; they travel less than 3 feet and fall onto the ground or nearby surfaces. Humans are believed to be the only host of the pertussis bacteria.

Older children, adolescents, and adults are most responsible for spreading pertussis because their immunity from the pertussis vaccine lessens over time.

What are the signs or symptoms of pertussis?

- Begins with cold-like signs or symptoms.
- Coughing that may progress to severe coughing, which may cause vomiting, loss of breath or difficulty catching breath.
- Coughing persists for weeks to months.
- Fever is minimal or absent.
- Symptoms are typically more severe in infants younger than 1 year. Infants may develop complications and often require hospitalization.

(over)

What are the incubation and contagious periods?

- Incubation period: 5 to 21 days; usually 7 to 10 days.
- Contagious period: A person is considered communicable until five days of appropriate antibiotic therapy has been completed. If not treated, a person may be contagious from the beginning of symptoms until 2 weeks after the cough begins, depending on age, immunization status, previous episodes of infection with pertussis, and antibiotic treatment. An infant who has no pertussis immunizations may remain infectious for 6 weeks or more after the cough starts.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

- Vaccination is the best way to protect against pertussis. Pertussis vaccine is given with diphtheria and tetanus vaccines in the same shot. The shot that is currently used for children less than 7 years old is called DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis). Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria, acellular pertussis) is a vaccine for adolescents and adults used mostly as a booster shot.
- Practice good hand-hygiene and teach children to cough into their elbow or sleeve.
- Strictly adhere to the 3 foot minimum between children at nap times.
- Be vigilant for children with prolonged cough and encourage parents to have children evaluated when a cough extends beyond a week.
- Complete a daily health check and keep a symptom log (cough, fever, congestion) on all children. This log may provide you with valuable information on the spread of communicable diseases such as pertussis.

Exclude from group setting?

An infected person should be excluded from child care or work for five days after beginning antibiotic treatment. If treatment is refused or the diagnosis is delayed, exclude for three weeks after onset of the violent coughing.



If you have any questions, please call the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department Communicable Disease Program at 402-441-8053.