

Minnesota Department of Health

Pertussis: What Parents Need to Know

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a persistent cough illness. Anyone of any age can get pertussis.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms of pertussis are similar to a cold. After a week or two, the cough worsens and begins to occur in sudden, uncontrollable bursts. Persons with pertussis may seem well between coughing spells. The coughing spells become less frequent over time, but may continue for several weeks or months until the lungs heal.

Vomiting can occur following coughing. Children may make high-pitched whooping sounds when gasping for breath after coughing.

Is there a lab test for pertussis?

To test for pertussis, the nasal passage is swabbed. The material on the swab is then examined in the lab for the presence of pertussis bacteria. Only persons with symptoms of pertussis should be tested.

How long should someone with pertussis stay home from child care, school, or work?

Persons with pertussis should stay home from child care, school, work, and other activities until they have finished 5 days of antibiotics, unless they have already been coughing for 3 or more weeks.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis bacteria are spread through droplets produced during coughing or sneezing. These droplets don't travel very far through the air and usually only infect persons near by.

When and for how long can a person spread pertussis?

Persons with pertussis can spread it to others in the first 3 weeks of coughing if not treated with antibiotics. After a person with pertussis has taken antibiotics for 5 days, he or she can no longer spread the disease.

Although the cough can last longer than 3 weeks, a person is no longer contagious after the third week.

How can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis is to be vaccinated. In addition to routine childhood immunizations, a pertussis vaccine booster is recommended for adolescents and adults. The booster shot (Tdap) is given in combination with tetanus and diphtheria. Ask your healthcare provider for more information.

Persons who have completed some or all of the recommended vaccinations for pertussis may still get pertussis disease, but will generally have a milder illness.

Antibiotics are sometimes recommended and prescribed to prevent pertussis in close contacts of someone with pertussis.

Contact your healthcare provider if your child develops pertussis-like symptoms or have been exposed to someone with pertussis.

More Tips!

Wash your hands often.
Stay at home if you are ill.

When coughing, cover your mouth with a tissue or cough into your sleeve.



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