

Frequently Asked Questions

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, a respiratory illness commonly known as whooping cough, is a contagious disease caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. These bacteria attach to the cilia (tiny, hair-like extensions) that line part of the upper respiratory system. The bacteria release toxins, which damage the cilia and cause inflammation (swelling).

Is pertussis treatable?

Yes. Pertussis is generally treated with antibiotics and early treatment is very important. Treatment may make your infection less severe if it is started early, before coughing fits begin. Treatment can also help prevent spreading the disease to close contacts (people who have spent a lot of time around the infected person) and is necessary for stopping the spread of pertussis.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is only found in humans and is spread from person to person. The disease is usually spread when people who have pertussis cough or sneeze while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. It is important to stress that pertussis is spread by *close* contact with those who have contracted the disease.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The disease usually starts with cold-like symptoms and maybe a mild cough. After 1 to 2 weeks, severe coughing can begin. Unlike the common cold, pertussis can become a series of coughing fits that continues for weeks. Pertussis is most dangerous for babies. A significant number of babies under 1 year of age who get the disease require hospitalization.

How can I prevent pertussis?

Over the long term, the best way to prevent pertussis (whooping cough) among infants, children, teens, and adults is to get vaccinated.

People who fit into the following categories are more likely to have complications from pertussis. To prevent complications from pertussis CDC recommends prophylactic treatment for close contacts in these categories. CDC also recommends treatment if you are a contact to a case and a close contact to someone in these categories.

- Babies less than 12 months of age

- Pregnant women

- Asthma (young children, or on a daily inhaler, or if hospitalized for asthma in the last year)

- Weakened immune system (HIV, chemotherapy, organ transplant, immunosuppressive therapy)

- Healthcare Provider (direct care to pregnant women, infants, immunocompromised, inpatient)

- COPD/Emphysema/Chronic Bronchitis/Cystic fibrosis/Lung cancer

When can I return to school or work?

If you have symptoms and have been tested for pertussis you may return to school/work when you receive a negative test or if the test is positive you may return after finishing 5 days of antibiotics.

How can I find out more about pertussis?

The Centers for Disease Control maintains an extensive compilation of information about pertussis on its web site: <http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/> Most of the information in this letter was drawn from the CDC literature.