

PERTUSSIS (WHOOPIING COUGH) INFORMATION SHEET

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a contagious bacterial infection of the upper respiratory system. The infection causes irritation in breathing passages, resulting in severe coughing spells. Symptoms of pertussis typically last 6 to 10 weeks, but may last longer. This is one of the most common vaccine-preventable diseases in the U.S. It's important to remember that both children and adults can get pertussis.

Since the 1980s, there's been a dramatic increase in the number of cases of pertussis, especially among teens (10–19 years of age) and infants less than 5 months of age. In 2005, there were more than 25,000 total reported cases.

Symptoms

Pertussis can cause serious illness in children and adults. The disease starts like the common cold with runny nose or congestion, sneezing, and maybe mild cough or fever. But after 1–2 weeks, severe coughing begins. It changes from a dry, hacking cough to bursts of uncontrollable, often violent coughing. During a coughing episode, it may be temporarily impossible to take a breath because of the intensity and repetition of coughs. Vomiting and severe exhaustion often follow a coughing spell. But between coughing episodes, the infected person often appears normal.

How It Spreads

People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. Because it is carried by large droplets, it is generally not spread by surface contact or to those more than three feet from a coughing individual.

The incubation period is 7 to 21 days, meaning that symptoms start about 1 to 3 weeks after exposure to the bacteria. Infected individuals are usually not contagious after about 3 weeks of coughing, though coughing may continue after the bacteria can no longer be detected.

Prevention

The best way to prevent pertussis is to get vaccinated. In the U.S., the recommended pertussis vaccine is called DTaP / Tdap. This is a safe and effective combination vaccine that protects against three diseases: pertussis, diphtheria, and tetanus. As with all vaccines, it does not protect 100% of susceptible persons.

You can get whooping cough more than once. After being immunized or after recovering from whooping cough infection, you are temporarily protected from getting a severe form of the disease again. But this protection does not last. You can get another whooping cough infection years later. You can reduce your risk of infection by getting the recommended booster shot with the pertussis vaccine.

Treatment

Whooping cough is treated with antibiotics, primarily to help reduce the spread of infection. If given during the very early stage of the illness, antibiotics may help shorten the illness. Over-the-counter medicines have not been shown to help relieve symptoms, but other measures, such as a cool-air humidifier, may help reduce discomfort.

For confirmed or probable cases of pertussis, the local health department will notify close contacts of the case to get preventive treatment.

If you believe you have symptoms of pertussis, contact your health care provider.