

# **FACT SHEET on Pertussis (Whooping Cough)**

## **What is pertussis?**

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a disease caused by bacteria. Pertussis is usually mild in older children and adults, but it often causes serious problems in babies.

## **Who gets pertussis?**

Pertussis is most common among babies, but anyone can get it. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in babies, teens, and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough. Babies often get pertussis from older children or adults.

## **What are the symptoms of pertussis?**

Pertussis begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever, and cough that slowly gets worse. After one to two weeks, the cough gets worse and usually starts to occur in strong “coughing fits.” This type of coughing may last for six or more weeks. There is generally no fever during this time. In young children, coughing fits are often followed by a whooping sound as they try to catch their breath. After coughing, a person may have difficulty catching their breath, vomit, or become blue in the face from lack of air. The coughing spells may be so bad that it is hard for babies to eat, drink, or breathe. The cough is often worse at night, and cough medicines usually do not help reduce the cough. Between coughing spells, the person often appears to be well. Some babies may only have apnea (failure to breathe) and can die from this. Adults, teens, and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that mimic bronchitis or asthma.

## **How is pertussis spread?**

The pertussis bacteria live in the nose, mouth, and throat, and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or talks. Other people nearby can then inhale the bacteria. Touching a tissue or sharing a cup used by someone with pertussis can also spread the disease. The first symptoms usually appear within 5 days to 21 days after a person is infected.

## **Is pertussis dangerous?**

It can be, especially for babies. Pertussis can cause breathing problems (apnea), pneumonia, and swelling of the brain (encephalopathy), which can lead to seizures and brain damage. Pertussis can also cause death (rarely), especially in babies.

## **How is pertussis diagnosed?**

A doctor may diagnose a patient with pertussis because of their symptoms. To confirm the diagnosis, the doctor will swab the back of the nose for laboratory testing. It is important to remember laboratory tests may be negative even if a patient has pertussis.

## **How is pertussis treated?**

Antibiotics are used to treat the infected person and their close contacts. In addition, it is helpful to get plenty of rest and fluids. Persons hospitalized with severe pertussis may need special treatments to help them through prolonged periods of coughing.

**Can pertussis be prevented?**

Yes. Pertussis may be prevented in household members and close contacts of a person with pertussis by treating them with antibiotics, even if they have been vaccinated. Vaccination of children in early infancy may also prevent pertussis. Pertussis vaccine is given along with diphtheria and tetanus vaccines in the same shot (called DTaP). The vaccine cannot be given to persons seven years of age or older. Vaccine protection begins to fade in older children and adults. Most hospitalizations and deaths occur in children less than three months of age. When possible, babies should be kept away from people who are coughing. Babies with any coughing illness should be seen by a doctor.

**Is the pertussis vaccine safe?**

Yes, it is safe for most people. Though there is a very slight risk of problems caused by the vaccine, pertussis is extremely serious. Pertussis causes about 10 deaths to 20 deaths each year in the United States. That is why experts recommend that all babies and children be given a full series of DTaP vaccine unless there is a medical reason not to receive the vaccine.

**Where can you get more information?**

Your doctor or nurse

Your local health department

Teton County Health Department

(307)733-6401