



Pertussis (whooping cough) Fact Sheet

- 1. What is pertussis (whooping cough)?** – Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious respiratory disease. It is caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. Pertussis is known for uncontrollable, violent coughing which often makes it hard to breathe. After fits of many coughs, someone with pertussis often needs to take deep breathes which result in a "whooping" sound.
- 2. Who gets pertussis?** - Pertussis can cause serious illness in infants, children and adults and can even be life-threatening, especially in infants.
- 3. How do you get pertussis?** - People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. Many infants who get pertussis are infected by older siblings, parents or caregivers who might not even know they have the disease.
- 4. How soon do symptoms start?** – Symptoms of pertussis usually develop within 7 – 10 days after being exposed, but sometimes not for as long as 6 weeks.
- 5. What are the symptoms of pertussis?** - Pertussis begins as a mild illness like the common cold. Sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever, and mild coughing progress to severe coughing. Some persons have episodes of rapid coughing followed by a high-pitched whoop as they take a deep breath. However, not everyone with pertussis has a whooping cough, especially very young infants. Severe cough may continue for many weeks despite proper treatment. Symptoms may be milder in older children and adults. However, pertussis can be a serious disease, especially in infants and young children. Complications can include pneumonia, dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy, and death.
- 6. How is pertussis diagnosed?** – Diagnosis is based on the recovery of the bacteria from nasopharyngeal specimens obtained early in the course of the disease.
- 7. How is pertussis treated?** - 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. Treatment after three weeks of illness is unlikely to help because the bacteria are gone from your body, even though you usually will still have symptoms. This is because the bacteria have already done damage to your body.
- 8. How can pertussis be prevented?** The single best control measure is adequate vaccination.
- 9. For more information about pertussis:** <http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/index.html>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician for specific clinical information.