

# Pertussis Fact Sheet

## What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a contagious respiratory disease caused by a bacteria found in the mouth, nose, and throat of an infected person. It is known as “whooping cough” due to the “whoop” sound made when the person tries to breathe after hard coughing and choking spells. Severe illness is more common in young children who have not been immunized. Older children, teens, and adults with pertussis may have milder symptoms. This can be hard to diagnose in very young infants, teens, and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough.

## How is pertussis spread and what can be done to prevent it?

It is spread when infected people cough or sneeze, expelling droplets that contain the germs that are then inhaled by others. Touching contaminated objects such as tissues or cups can also spread the disease. Infants often get the disease from older siblings or adults. A person can transmit pertussis starting about 7 days after being infected, and remain infectious until about 3 weeks after the onset of coughing.

## What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Initial symptoms are low grade fever, runny nose, sneezing, and occasional cough. In 1-2 weeks the cough becomes more severe. The bouts of coughing may be followed by a crowing or high-pitched whoop as the patient tries to make a breath and the lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air. Vomiting can occur with severe episodes. In between coughing episodes people may feel and appear fairly healthy much of the time. In children less than 1 year old, complications include pneumonia, convulsions, and, in rare cases, brain damage. Many people cough for 1 month or longer. Symptoms appear 7-10 days after exposure but may not show up for as long as 21 days. These episodes may recur for one to two months or longer, and are more frequent at night.

## How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may suspect a patient has this based on symptoms, to confirm it a sample must be taken from the back of the nose for testing. A laboratory then tests the sample to determine whether the patient has it or not.

## How is pertussis treated?

Call your doctor if you think you or your children have been exposed. An antibiotic is usually prescribed for treatment and also to the infected person’s household contacts and other close contacts to prevent the disease even if they were vaccinated. Stay home from school, work, and other activities until you have taken an appropriate antibiotic for 5 days. Drink plenty of fluids to avoid being dehydrated. Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing. Wash hands often using soap and water. Complications may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, dehydration, seizures, brain disorders, brief period of not breathing, and death. 80% of pertussis-related deaths occur in children under 1 year of age.

## How is it prevented?

Babies are the most vulnerable. It is important to surround the infant with vaccinated people such as family, friends, childcare, and healthcare providers. For children under 7 years the DTaP vaccine includes protection against pertussis. Infants and children should get 5 doses of this vaccine; they need their first dose at 2 months of age. Additional doses are given at 4 months, 6 months, between 12-18 months and 4-6 years of age. For people 7 years of age and older a dose of Tdap is recommended at age 11 or 12. This dose can be given as early as 7 years of age if the child missed earlier DTaP doses. It is recommended that all adults younger than 65 years of age receive the Tdap vaccine. Adults older than 65 years of age may also receive the Tdap vaccine. Pregnant women are recommended to get the Tdap vaccine but should contact your health care provider.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call the Bay County Health Dept at (989) 895-4003.

Visit our website at <http://www.baycounty-mi.gov/Health/> or the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)