

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough): Questions and Answers

## Information about the disease and vaccines

### What is pertussis or whooping cough?

Pertussis or “whooping cough” is a very serious and contagious respiratory disease caused by bacteria.

### What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins with a mild cold for the first 1–2 weeks with the following symptoms:

- a runny or stuffy nose
- sneezing
- low-grade fever
- a mild cough

After 1-2 weeks, the coughs starts or becomes worse:

- The cough can be very hard, over and over.
- Coughing fits make it hard to breathe, eat, drink, or sleep. Coughing fits happen more at night;
- Some have to gasp for breath after a coughing fit, and may make a "whooping" sound. This sound is where the name “whooping cough” comes from. Babies may not cough or make this sound;
- Vomiting after a coughing fit can occur;
- Coughing fits can last up to 10 weeks;
- The cough may be milder in adolescents, adults, or vaccinated people, but these individuals are still able to transmit the disease to others.

### How serious is pertussis?

Pertussis can be a very serious disease, especially for babies and young children. About 1 out of 4 babies and children with pertussis will get pneumonia (a serious lung infection). Pertussis can also cause seizures and brain damage.

### How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread through the air when an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezing. People with pertussis can spread the disease since they begin having cold-like symptoms up through 2 weeks after the cough starts.

### How long does it take to show signs of pertussis?

Pertussis usually takes 7 to 10 days to show symptoms, but the range is anywhere between 4 to 21 days.

### How do I know if I have pertussis?

Pertussis can be diagnosed by a health care provider based on symptoms and/or laboratory testing.

### What is the treatment for pertussis?

Antibiotics can treat pertussis. After completing an antibiotic treatment, a person with pertussis is no longer contagious. However, the cough can still be present.

### Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

Yes. Children should get five doses of the DTaP vaccine at the following ages for best protection:

- One dose each at 2 months, 4 months, and 6 months;
- A fourth dose at 15 through 18 months; and
- A fifth dose at 4 through 6 years of age.

Pre-teens and adults should get a booster vaccine called Tdap to stay protected against the disease.

### What can I do to protect me and my family from pertussis?

- Keep newborns away from anyone with cold symptoms or a cough;
- Vaccinate your child on time;
- Make sure you, your child’s caregivers, and older siblings get a one-time recommended dose of Tdap vaccine to protect themselves and children too young to be fully vaccinated;
- Talk with your child’s doctor if you have questions;
- Keep a record of your child’s vaccinations – to make sure your child is up-to-date.

### How can I learn more about pertussis or the vaccine?

To learn more talk to your healthcare provider, visit the CDC website <http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/>, or call the Pima County Health Department.



**Pima County Health Department**  
**Monday through Friday 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM**  
**(520) 243-7797**