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.