



Whatcom County Health Department

FACT SHEET: PERTUSSIS (WHOOPIING COUGH)

What is it?

Pertussis is a very contagious bacterial infection that causes coughing spasms and choking. Sometimes when the infected person coughs, the person will make a “whoop” sound when breathing in.

What are the symptoms?

- Symptoms usually appear between 7 to 10 days after exposure to the bacteria, but it may take as long as 20 days.
- The disease starts with cold symptoms – runny nose and cough. A fever may or may not be present. Within 1 to 2 weeks, spasms of coughing start. The person may look and feel fairly healthy between coughing spells.
- The lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air during the coughing spasms. The person may vomit after coughing.
- During the severe coughing stage, the person may have convulsions (fits) and in some cases the person will die.
- Usually school aged children and adults have milder symptoms than young children.

What are possible complications?

- Pertussis is most dangerous to children less than 1 year old
- Complications include pneumonia, convulsions, and in rare cases brain damage or death.

How is it spread?

- It is spread through droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.
- People treated with appropriate antibiotics can still spread the disease until they have taken antibiotics for a full 5 days
- If antibiotics are not taken, the person can be contagious for 2-3 weeks after the coughing spells start.

Who gets it?

- Anyone who is exposed can get it.
- People who are not completely vaccinated are at highest risk.
- Vaccinated people can still get pertussis because protection from the vaccine lasts only 5 to 10 years after the last dose.

What is the treatment?

- A health care provider must prescribe a specific antibiotic.

How can we prevent pertussis?

- The vaccination against pertussis is included in the DTap vaccine for children under 7 years of age, who should get 4 doses by 15 months and a booster at 4 to 6 years of age.
- Adolescents and adults, ages 11 to 64 years, should get a booster of the new Tdap vaccine.
- People with pertussis should avoid contact with others until the first 5 full days of the antibiotic treatment have been taken.
- You should get antibiotics to prevent pertussis:
 1. If you live with someone who has pertussis, or
 2. If you have had close contact while the person was coughing and still spreading the disease.
- Prevention is important because you could spread the disease to others who are more likely to have complications.

