

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Burlington County Health Department 15 Pioneer Blvd. Westampton, NJ 08060
Telephone (609) 265-5548 Fax (609) 265-3152

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a very contagious disease caused by bacteria (germs). Pertussis is usually mild in older children and adults, but it often causes serious problems in very young infants.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis symptoms have three stages. The first stage begins like a cold with a runny nose, sneezing, and possibly a mild cough. This phase lasts for a week or two then slowly gets worse. The second stage is marked by uncontrolled coughing spells, vomiting after coughing, and sometimes a whooping noise that you can hear when the person breathes in. During severe coughing spells or spasms, a person may stop breathing or become blue in the face from lack of air. Between spells, the person often appears to be well. This stage lasts for 1 to 6 weeks. The cough gradually subsides in the third phase over a period of weeks to months. Adults, teens, and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that look like bronchitis.

How is pertussis spread?

The germs that cause pertussis live in the nose, mouth and throat, and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. Other people nearby can then breathe in the germs. Touching a tissue or sharing a cup used by someone with pertussis can also spread the disease. The first symptoms appear about 5 to 10 days after a person is exposed. People with pertussis can spread the disease starting 2 weeks before until 3 weeks after the cough starts, or until they have finished 5 days of the 14-day antibiotic treatment.

Who gets pertussis?

Since the 1980s, the number of reported pertussis cases has steadily increased, especially among adolescents, adults, and unvaccinated children. Immunity to pertussis wanes approximately 5-10 years after completion of childhood vaccination, leaving adolescents and adults susceptible to pertussis.

Is pertussis dangerous?

It can be, especially for infants. Pertussis can cause breathing problems, pneumonia and swelling of the brain (encephalitis), which can lead to seizures and brain damage. Pertussis can also cause death, especially in very young infants, but this is rare. In older children, teens and adults, the disease is milder but may last for weeks or months.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may think a patient has pertussis because of the symptoms, but a swab from the back of the nose is the only way to be sure.

How is pertussis treated?

The main treatment is plenty of rest and fluids. Oxygen and medicine to help the patient breathe are sometimes needed to help control severe coughing spells. Antibiotics can make the disease milder if they are started early enough and help prevent the spread of the disease. Anyone who has been exposed to pertussis should see a doctor for antibiotics to prevent the disease, even if they were vaccinated.

Can pertussis be prevented?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent pertussis infection in both children and adults. For children under 7, DTaP (diphtheria and tetanus toxoids and acellular pertussis) is the recommended vaccine. For adolescents and adults (ages 7 to 64), Tdap (tetanus and diphtheria toxoids and acellular pertussis) is the recommended vaccine. In New Jersey, all 6th graders born after January 1, 1997 must now receive Tdap. For adults, it is recommended that they receive Tdap in place of their next Td (tetanus and diphtheria toxoids) shot if they have not yet received Tdap.

What are the risks from these vaccines?

As with all injected vaccines, DTaP and Tdap may cause local redness and pain and a low grade fever. More severe reactions are rare. The risk of harm from the vaccine is much lower than the risk of harm from pertussis. Many more young children will get pertussis if parents stop getting the vaccine for them.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/>
- The Burlington County Department of Health at (609)-265-5548.
- The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (NJDHSS) at (609) 588-7465 or on the NJDHSS Website at <http://www.state.nj.us/health>.

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