

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a highly contagious bacterial infection that causes a long-lasting and often severe cough. *Bordetella pertussis*, a bacterium, causes pertussis. The illness usually starts with mild cold symptoms or cough, which can turn into severe coughing spells followed by gagging, or vomiting and sometimes a “whoop” sound when trying to catch the breath. Young infants, adolescents and adults with whooping cough are less likely to make the “whoop” sound. Infants with pertussis may eat poorly, turn blue, or stop breathing. Infants are also at highest risk for severe pertussis complications that require hospitalization such as difficulty breathing, pneumonia, convulsions, and even death.

Who gets whooping cough?

Anyone exposed to the bacteria can get whooping cough but severe illness is more common in infants and young kids who have not been immunized or who have not yet had enough doses of vaccine to be fully protected. No vaccine is 100 percent effective, so even vaccinated people can catch this very contagious disease. Immunized older kids, adolescents, or adults may have milder symptoms so health care providers may not recognize their illness as whooping cough. Immunity, either from having the disease or from getting vaccinated, decreases over time so it’s important to get booster doses of pertussis vaccine on time.

How common is whooping cough in Washington?

Our state has had between 184 and 1026 cases of pertussis each year over the past decade, with zero to two deaths each year. Since late 2011, there has been a marked increase in reported pertussis cases, and the disease is currently at epidemic levels in some parts of the state. Find information online about [the current number of cases reported so far this year](#) and [pertussis cases reported in past years](#).

How does whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough spreads by coughing and sneezing. Infants often get whooping cough from family members or caregivers who don’t know they’re sick. The disease in older kids and adults can be quite mild and if untreated, an infected person can spread pertussis for several weeks. Providers should consider a diagnosis of whooping cough in anyone with persistent coughs in order to prevent spreading the infection to infants and young kids.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms start 5 to 21 days (average 7 to 10 days) after exposure.

How is pertussis prevented?

Get vaccinated to prevent pertussis. Community (or herd) immunity helps slow down the spread of disease but only works when most people are immune. At least 9 out of 10 of us must have

immunity to whooping cough to keep the disease from spreading. Kids and adults can get vaccinated to help stop outbreaks and lower the risk of infection to babies and others most likely to get severe cases of pertussis. People who have (or may have) whooping cough should get antibiotics early in their illness and stay home from work or school and away from young kids and infants until properly treated or until they no longer have symptoms. Providers can prescribe preventive antibiotics to people in close contact with someone with whooping cough if they are at high risk for severe disease or have close contact with those at high risk for severe disease.

Who needs whooping cough vaccine?

Before age seven, kids should get five doses of the diphtheria, tetanus, and acellular pertussis vaccine ([DTaP](#)).

The following people should get one dose of a different type of tetanus diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccine ([Tdap](#)):

- Adolescents aged 11 to 18 years (preferably at age 11 or 12 years).
- Kids aged 7 to 10 years who are not up-to-date on their whooping cough vaccinations (and then continue as needed with the recommended doses of diphtheria and tetanus vaccines).
- Adults aged 19 to 64 years who have not had the Tdap vaccine before.
- Pregnant women in the late second or early third trimester who have not had the Tdap vaccine before.
- Adults 65 years or older who have not had the Tdap vaccine and have close contact with kids younger than 12 months.
- Health care workers who provide direct patient care and who have not had the Tdap vaccine before.

The Tdap booster vaccine is very important for everyone who will have contact with new infants, especially pregnant women, family members, and health care workers.

What should I do if I think someone in my family has whooping cough?

It is important to consider a diagnosis of whooping cough whenever someone has a persistent cough, especially if it lasts longer than two weeks, or if the coughing occurs in “spells” followed by difficulty catching the breath or gagging. If you think you or one of your family members has whooping cough, call your health care provider and ask about the disease. Try to stay away from other people until treated (or until another diagnosis for the cough proves it’s not contagious).

Where can I get more information?

- Your [local health department](#)
- [Communicable Disease Epidemiology](#) at 206-418-5500 or 877-539-4344 (toll free)
- [Office of Immunization and Child Profile](#) at 360-236-3595