

What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a very contagious infection that causes a coughing illness. It is caused by bacteria (germs) that are found in the mouth, nose, and throat of an infected person. Pertussis is also known as whooping cough.

What are symptoms of pertussis?

The illness begins with cold-like symptoms, such as a runny nose, sore throat, and mild cough. Within 1-2 weeks, the cough becomes more severe, and leads to coughing fits, difficulty in getting one's breath, mucus production, vomiting following coughing, and a "whooping" sound while struggling to inhale after coughing. Fever is usually absent, and people often do not appear ill between coughing fits. The disease may last 6-10 weeks or longer. Pertussis is most dangerous in infants less than 6 months of age, and serious complications can occur.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms appear between 5-21 days after exposure, usually 7-10 days.

How is pertussis spread?

The bacteria are found in the nose and throat of an ill person and are spread through droplets when infected people cough, sneeze, or talk. The greatest risk of spread is during the early stage when it appears to be a "cold".

Who may become ill with pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Severe illness is more common in infants and young children who either have never been vaccinated or who have not received the full series of vaccines. Many cases occur in older children and adults because protection from the vaccine lasts only 5 to 10 years after the last dose.

How long is a person infectious (contagious)?

Without antibiotic treatment, a person is contagious for up to 3 weeks after the start of coughing fits. If treated with antibiotics, then the ill person is contagious until 5 days after treatment begins even though the cough may continue.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A swab from the back of the nose and throat is necessary for identifying the bacteria. A routine throat culture is not adequate to diagnose this disease. It may take as long as 10 days to receive the results of the test, although most test results are available within a few days.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics, preferably azithromycin or erythromycin, are used to treat the disease. During this time, the ill individual should remain at home to reduce the spread of the disease.

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How can pertussis be prevented?

The vaccination against pertussis is included in the DTaP, DTP and Tdap vaccines. Pertussis is the “P” part of the vaccine. Children less than 7 years of age should get 5 doses of the DTaP/DTP vaccine--at 2, 4, 6, and 12-15 months, and at 4-6 years of age. 7-9 year olds should get vaccinated with Tdap if they did not complete their primary series. Adolescents and adults 10 years and older should get one booster dose of Tdap if they have not previously received a Tdap. Pregnant women should be immunized during the late second or third trimester of each pregnancy to help protect their newborn infants irrespective of prior history of receiving Tdap. Consult your health care provider if you have vaccine questions or call Snohomish Health District Immunization Clinic at 425-339-5220.

Pertussis is a Washington State reportable disease and must be reported to your local health department. In Snohomish County, contact Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response at 425.339.5278, Monday through Friday, 8AM - 5 PM.

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