



CALHOUN COUNTY  
**Public Health Department**

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## Fact Sheet

# Pertussis

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### **What is pertussis?**

Pertussis is a contagious bacterial disease, caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*, that affects the respiratory tract. It is commonly known as “whooping cough”.

### **Who gets pertussis?**

Pertussis can infect persons of all ages. Severe illness is more common in young children who have not been immunized. Older children, teens, and adults with pertussis may have milder symptoms. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in very young infants, teens, and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough.

### **How is pertussis spread?**

The bacteria that cause whooping cough spread easily from person to person through the air. When a person who has whooping cough sneezes or coughs, they can release small particles with the bacteria in them. Other people then breathe in the bacteria. It also spreads when people spend a lot of time together or share breathing space, like when you hold a newborn on your chest. People can spread the bacteria from the very start of symptoms to up to three weeks after coughing begins.

### **What are the symptoms of pertussis?**

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. At first, symptoms resemble those of a cold, with sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever, and a mild cough. After 1-2 weeks the cough becomes more severe and uncontrolled. Coughing spells may be intense and followed by a crowing or high-pitched “whoop” as they struggle to inhale air. Thick, clear mucus may be discharged. The coughing is so severe that it can be hard for the person to

eat, drink, or sleep. During bouts of coughing, the lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air. After the coughing spells, vomiting and exhaustion is often experienced. The severe coughing can last 1 to 2 months or longer. Coughing spells are more frequent at night. Young children who have not been immunized have the most severe symptoms. In older children and adults, the symptoms are usually milder and without the typical whoop.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms generally begin 7 to 10 days after exposure to the bacteria but may not show up for as long as 6 weeks.

### **When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?**

A person can transmit pertussis from early in the illness (minor upper respiratory symptoms similar to the common cold) to approximately 3 weeks after the cough begins. By taking antibiotics, the contagious period is reduced to about 5 days from the start of treatment.

### **How is pertussis diagnosed?**

A doctor may suspect a patient has pertussis based on symptoms. To confirm the diagnosis, a sample of mucus must be taken from the back of the nose for testing. A laboratory then tests the sample to determine whether the patient has pertussis.

### **Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?**

A pertussis infection results in immunity for several years, but the immunity eventually fades.

### **What is the treatment for pertussis?**

Pertussis is treated with a course of antibiotics. Call your doctor if you think you, or your children, have been exposed. It is often recommended that close contacts of the infected person also be given antibiotics to prevent or reduce the severity of the disease.

Drink plenty of fluids to avoid being dehydrated. Carefully cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing. Wash hands often using soap and water. Stay away from others, especially infants and young children, until you have been on antibiotics for 5 days. Treatment for young children may include supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation to help the child during the prolonged period of coughing.

This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

## **Are there complications from pertussis?**

The most common complication is pneumonia, which is the main cause of death for those with pertussis. Seizures, loss of appetite, middle ear infection, and dehydration can also occur. In rare cases, encephalopathy (disorders of the brain) and death can occur. 80% of pertussis-related deaths occur in children under 1 year of age.

## **How can pertussis be prevented?**

The pertussis vaccine is effective in preventing the illness in infants and children. The vaccine is given in a series of 5 shots from two months of age until school age. Pertussis can be prevented by getting vaccinated with a pertussis-containing vaccine, typically a Diphtheria, Tetanus and Pertussis (DTap) for children under 7 years or Tetanus, Diphtheria, and Pertussis (Tdap) for anyone 7 years or older. All pregnant women are recommended a Tdap vaccination with every pregnancy as the baby will receive some protection while in utero. Protection from the childhood vaccine fades over time. This is especially important for families with new infants. Any adult who has never been vaccinated with a Tdap vaccination should receive one prior to being around infants to prevent any exposure to pertussis.

## **How do I get more information on pertussis?**

Calhoun County Public Health Department

Phone: 269-969-6383

 [www.facebook.com/CCPublicHealthDepartment/](https://www.facebook.com/CCPublicHealthDepartment/)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Phone: 800-232-4636 (800-CDC-INFO)

Website: [www.cdc.gov/pertussis/](https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/)

Spanish: [www.cdc.gov/pertussis/index-sp.html](https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/index-sp.html)

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