

# Fact Sheet: Pertussis

## What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a very contagious disease of the respiratory tract caused by bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. Pertussis is also known as “whooping cough” due to the “whoop” sound made when the infected person tries to breathe after hard coughing and choking spells. Children younger than 6 months of age, partially vaccinated children, adolescents, and adults may not have the whoop.

## What are the symptoms?

Initial symptoms are:

- Low grade fever, runny nose, sneezing and occasional cough. In 1-2 weeks the cough becomes more severe.
- During bouts of coughing, the lips and nails may turn blue for lack of air. Vomiting can occur with severe episodes.
- In between coughing episodes people may feel and appear fairly healthy much of the time.
- In children less than 1 year old, complications include pneumonia, convulsions, and, in rare cases, brain damage. The majority of deaths from pertussis occur in infants younger than 2 months of age.
- Many people cough for 1 month or longer.

Symptoms appear 7-10 days after exposure.

## How is it spread?

Pertussis is spread through airborne droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. The greatest risk of spread is during the early stage when the symptoms resemble a cold.

## How is it treated?

- Call your doctor if you think you or your children have been exposed.
- An antibiotic is usually prescribed for treatment.
- Stay home from school, work, and other activities until you have taken an appropriate antibiotic for 5 days.
- 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.

## How is it prevented?

### For children under 7 years:

The DTaP vaccine includes protection against pertussis. Infants and children should get 5 doses of this vaccine; they need their first dose at 2 months of age. Additional doses are given at 4 months, 6 months, between 12–18 months and 4–6 years of age.

### For 10 to 64 year-olds:

A vaccine called Tdap is available. Teens and adults need a booster of vaccine because the protection they had as a child is mostly gone. No vaccine is 100% effective, so those who have been vaccinated may still get sick with pertussis. Immunity following a pertussis infection is not permanent and persons with a history of pertussis should receive a single dose of Tdap when indicated.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self -diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.*

