

Whooping Cough (Pertussis) Questions and Answers

Frequently Asked Questions

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What is whooping cough and how is it spread?

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a highly contagious bacterial infection that causes a long-lasting and often severe cough. Whooping cough is spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Infants often get whooping cough from family members or care givers who do not know they are sick. An infected person can spread whooping cough for several weeks if the illness is not treated.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

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. Babies do not always cough, but they may eat poorly, turn blue or stop breathing. Babies under one year old are also at highest risk for severe pertussis complications that require hospitalization such as difficulty breathing, pneumonia, convulsions, and even death.

Who should be concerned about whooping cough?

Everyone should be concerned about whooping cough, but the disease is more common in infants and young children who have not been immunized or who have not yet had enough doses of vaccine to be fully protected. If you have frequent contact with young infants or children, you should be concerned and take appropriate measures to protect them from the disease.

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

If 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, it could be whooping cough. If you think you or one of your family members has whooping cough, call your healthcare provider and ask about the

disease. Try to stay away from other people until treated or until another diagnosis proves it is not contagious.

What is the treatment for whooping cough?

A patient with whooping cough must take an antibiotic for five days to become non-contagious. A person diagnosed and treated for whooping cough should not return to day care, school, work, etc., until the antibiotic has been taken for at least five days.

How can I protect myself and my family from whooping cough?

Vaccination is the best prevention for whooping cough. The more people in the community who have immunity through vaccination, the less likely the disease is to spread. Children 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. Children younger than age seven get the DTaP vaccination and anyone over age seven get the Tdap vaccination. Immunity from having the disease or from getting vaccinated decreases over time, so it is important to get booster doses.

People who have (or may have) an extended cough illness should see a healthcare provider and stay home from work or school and away from young kids and infants until properly diagnosed and treated or until they no longer have symptoms.

Who needs whooping cough vaccine?

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

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

- Children age 7 to 10 years who are not up-to-date on their whooping cough vaccinations.
- Adolescents age 11 to 18 years (preferably at age 11 or 12 years).

- All adults 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.
- Healthcare workers who have not had the Tdap vaccine before.
- Anyone who cares for babies less than 12 months old, like child care providers and grandparents.

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

I had the vaccine as a child so that means I don't need it again, right?

Even if you had the vaccine as a child, you still need a booster for effective immunity. Immunity wears off over time and does not offer lifetime protection. Children receive a full series of vaccines by age seven, but they should get a booster after age 11 especially in light of the current epidemic. The Tdap booster is very important for everyone who will have contact with infants, especially pregnant women, family members, and healthcare workers.

Where can I get a vaccine in Pierce County?

Visit www.tpchd.org/pertussis or call the Health Department for locations near you at (253) 798-6410.