

PERTUSSIS

PERSONAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis is a highly communicable vaccine preventable disease commonly known as whooping cough. It affects the respiratory tract, and is caused by a bacteria, Bordetella pertussis. The incidence of pertussis infection is highest in children under five years of age. However, adolescents and adults are also susceptible to infection.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is spread by direct contact with discharge from the respiratory tract of an infected person, or by breathing in droplets projected into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

An untreated person is most infectious during the early stages of the disease until three weeks after the onset of cough spasms. After a five to seven day course of treatment with a macrolide antibiotic such as, erythromycin, azithromycin or clarithromycin, a person is usually no longer infectious.

How is it treated?

Infants younger than 6 months of age with severe disease often require hospitalization to manage cough spasms, feeding difficulties or other complications.

Antibiotics given during the early stage of the disease shorten communicability and may reduce symptoms. Antibiotics given after the cough spasms have started have no effect on the course of the illness, but are recommended to limit the spread of the disease to others.

Household and other close contacts to a pertussis case should also be given a course of treatment with either erythromycin, azithromycin or clarithromycin.

How can we prevent Pertussis?

- Universal immunization of children under seven years of age with five doses of pertussis vaccine (Dtap) is critical for the control of pertussis.
- A single dose of Tdap is recommended for adolescents 11-18 years and adults 19-64 years of age, since pertussis immunity wanes five to ten years after the last dose of pertussis vaccine.

SYMPTOMS OF PERTUSSIS

- Disease progresses through three stages.
- Begins with upper respiratory symptoms, runny nose, sneezing watery eyes, lack of appetite.
- Followed with a dry irritating cough for one to two weeks.
- Cough becomes severe and the infected person experiences cough spasms and a high pitched whoop, then may expel thick mucous secretions followed by an episode of vomiting.
- Cough can last 1-2 months or longer.
- Infants 6 months of age and younger, adolescents and adults may not have the typical cough spasms and whoop.
- The interval from exposure to the appearance of symptoms is usually 9-10 days (with a range of 6-20 days).

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