

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

## What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

**Pertussis** [per-TUHS-is], better known as “whooping cough,” is a serious respiratory infection that causes sudden, intense coughing spells followed by gasping for air (whooping) that occurs most often at night. These coughing spasms are often followed by vomiting and may result in the skin looking blue. Whooping cough also results in breathing problems due to mucus collecting in the lungs.

For babies and young children who get whooping cough, especially those not vaccinated, the illness requires hospitalization and can be life-threatening. It can lead to pneumonia, seizures, and a disease of the brain called **encephalopathy** [en-sef-uh-LOP-uh-thee].

## What causes whooping cough?

Easily passed from one person to another, whooping cough is caused by a bacteria, **Bordetella** [BAWR-tuh-del-uh] **pertussis**, that enters the air when someone who is infected sneezes, coughs, and exhales. Mild symptoms of whooping cough usually appear 7 to 10 days after being exposed to the infection. An infected person is contagious when symptoms first appear and for 3 weeks during the long-lasting period of coughing spasms.

The risk of serious disease is highest in children under 5 years of age, with girls being affected more often than boys.

### Whooping Cough Vaccinations

Check off each vaccine dose you (or your child) has had, and enter the date:

- Dose 1: (date) \_\_\_\_\_
- Dose 2: (date) \_\_\_\_\_
- Dose 3: (date) \_\_\_\_\_
- Dose 4: (date) \_\_\_\_\_

## How is it diagnosed and treated?

To determine if someone has whooping cough, a doctor will take a sample of the mucus in the nose and test it for the bacteria. Treatment involves taking an antibiotic medicine called **erythromycin** [ih-rith-ruh-MAHY-sin] and may require help with breathing (respiratory support) and eating a clear liquid diet.

## Does whooping cough require a hospital stay?

When a child infected with whooping cough needs additional respiratory support—oxygen, suctioning of mucus, or monitoring—hospitalization is required, usually for 1 week or less. The patient will need to be in a private room, and anyone entering the room will wear a regular surgical mask until they have been taking antibiotics for 5 days. When the cough is no longer spasmodic and vomiting subsides (usually after a couple of weeks), normal activity and diet can be resumed. A mild cough may last for months.

## How can I prevent it?

Getting vaccinated is the most important way to prevent the infection. Whooping cough vaccine is given in 3 doses 2 months apart, beginning at 2 months of age. It is followed by a 4th dose given between 12 and 18 months of age. Erythromycin should be given to all close household contacts that have been around someone with whooping cough.

## Where can I learn more?

For more information about whooping cough, contact your doctor, the county health department, or Infection Control at any Intermountain hospital. Use the back of this fact sheet to write down your questions.

