

# Public Health Fact Sheet

## Pertussis

### (Whooping Cough)

#### **What is Pertussis?**

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a very contagious disease caused by bacteria (germs). Pertussis is usually mild in older children and adults, but it often causes serious problems in very young children (i.e., infants less than one year of age).

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

The early symptoms of pertussis often begin like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, fever and cough which can last 1 to 2 weeks. The cough gradually becomes worse. The next stage of pertussis includes uncontrolled coughing spells followed by a whooping noise when a person breathes in. During these severe coughing spells, a person may vomit, or their lips or face may look blue from a lack of oxygen. Between coughing spells, a person may appear well. The coughing spells may be so bad that it is hard for babies to eat, drink or breathe. This stage usually lasts 4-6 weeks. Adults, teens and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that mimic bronchitis or asthma. Some infants may have apnea (unable to breathe) and can die.

#### **Who gets Pertussis?**

Pertussis can occur at any age, but is most common in infants younger than 6 months of age and children 10 to 14 years of age.

#### **How is Pertussis spread?**

The bacteria are found in the mouths, noses, and throats of infected people. The bacteria are spread in the air by droplets produced during sneezing or coughing. Symptoms usually appear 7-10 days after by inhaling these droplets.

#### **How long can a person spread Pertussis?**

Pertussis is very contagious during the early stage of the illness and becomes less contagious by the end of 3 weeks. Antibiotics will shorten the contagious period of the illness.

#### **How is Pertussis diagnosed?**

A sample of mucus from the back of the nose must be taken during the early stage of the illness in order to grow the bacteria. Laboratory tests can be done on the sample to identify the bacteria.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have an infection, consult with your healthcare provider. This fact sheet is based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Health and Safety topic fact sheets.*

### **How is Pertussis treated?**

Infants < 6 months of age and persons with severe cases often require hospitalization and severe cases may require oxygen and mild sedation to help control coughing spells. Antibiotics may make the illness less severe if started in the early stage of the disease.

### **Can pertussis be prevented?**

Yes, there is a vaccine to prevent pertussis. It is given along with diphtheria and/or tetanus vaccines in the same shot (called DTaP or Tdap)

### **How can Pertussis be prevented?**

- Giving a series of shots to children in early infancy can prevent pertussis.
  - Pertussis vaccine is given at 2, 4, 6, and 15 months of age, and again when a child enters school.
  - At least 4 doses before starting Kindergarten are necessary to protect a child from pertussis. The vaccine works for most children, but it wears off after a number of years.
- Since immunity to pertussis decreases over time, booster doses are recommended for adolescents 11 to 18 years of age and into adulthood. It is also recommended for women who were not vaccinated previously with Tdap after they give birth, but before they are discharged from the hospital or birthing center.
- Persons with pertussis should avoid contact with others until they have taken 5 full days of an appropriate antibiotic.
- Prompt use of antibiotics in a household is helpful in limiting other cases. In a daycare setting, antibiotics should be given to household contacts and other close contacts. Children who develop symptoms within 21 days of exposure should be excluded from day care until a diagnosis can be made.

### **Where can you get more information?**

- Your Local Health Department
- Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Epidemiologic Services Section at (877) 427-7317
- <http://www.cdc.gov/health/default.htm>
- Your doctor, nurse, or local health center

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