



Tarrant County Public Health

A healthier community through leadership in health strategy

The Facts About Pertussis

What is pertussis (Whooping cough)?

Pertussis, also called “Whooping cough,” is a disease caused by bacteria. Pertussis is usually mild in older children and adults, but it often causes serious problems in babies.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis is most common among babies, but anyone can get it. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in babies, teens and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough. Babies often get pertussis from older children or adults.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever, and cough that slowly gets worse, and usually starts to occur in strong “coughing fits.” This type of coughing may last for six or more weeks. There is generally no fever during this time. In young children, coughing fits are often followed by a whooping sound as they try to catch their breath. After coughing, a person may have difficulty catching their breath, vomit, or become blue in the face from lack of air. The coughing spells may be so bad that it is hard for babies to eat, drink or breathe. The cough is often worse at night, and cough medicines usually do not help reduce the cough. Between coughing spells, the person often appears to be well. Some babies may only have apnea (failure to breathe) and can die from this. Adults, teens and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that mimic bronchitis or asthma.

How is pertussis spread?

The pertussis bacteria live in the nose, mouth and throat, and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. Other people nearby can then inhale the bacteria.

Touching a tissue or sharing a cup used by someone with pertussis can also spread the disease. The first symptoms usually appear within 5 days to 21 days after a person is infected.

Is pertussis dangerous?

It can be, especially for babies. Pertussis can cause breathing problems (apnea), pneumonia, and swelling of the brain (encephalopathy), which can lead to seizures and brain damage. Pertussis can also cause death (rarely), especially in babies.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may diagnose a patient with pertussis because of their symptoms. To confirm the diagnosis, the doctor will swab the back of the nose for laboratory testing. It is important to remember laboratory tests may be negative even if a patient has pertussis.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat the infected person and their close contacts. In addition, it is helpful to get plenty of rest and fluids. Persons hospitalized with severe pertussis may need special treatments to help them through prolonged periods of coughing.

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Can pertussis be prevented?

Yes. Pertussis may be prevented in household members and close contacts of a person with pertussis by treating them with antibiotics, even if they have been vaccinated. Vaccination of children in early infancy may also prevent pertussis. Because vaccine protection begins to fade in older children and adults, new vaccines (called Tdap) have been developed against pertussis for these age groups. To protect babies from being exposed to pertussis, families who have or are expecting a baby and people who work with babies should consult with their doctor about receiving this vaccine. Most hospitalizations and deaths occur in children less than three months of age. When possible, babies should be kept away from people who are coughing. Babies with any coughing illness should be seen by a doctor.

For more information, call 817-321-4700 or visit <http://health.tarrantcounty.com>

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