



District Health Department

Serving Fillmore, Gage, Jefferson, Saline, and Thayer Counties.

Note to parents:

While most children have been immunized against whooping cough, babies under 2 months, children who are not immunized and adults without a whooping cough booster shot can get the illness. To prevent the spread of illness, we ask that adults, even those who have had the disease, to get a booster shot against pertussis at their doctor's office. The PHSDHD will provide such boosters on a sliding fee basis to those without an ability to pay. Whooping cough can be a very serious disease, particularly for infants and young children who may suffer complications.

Pertussis (Whooping Cough): Questions and Answers

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as *whooping cough*, is a very contagious respiratory infection (infection of the lungs and breathing tubes). Whooping cough can be a very serious disease, particularly for infants and young children who may suffer complications.

How do I know if my child or I have whooping cough?

The diagnosis of whooping cough is usually made based on symptoms and physical examination. A laboratory test may be done, which involves taking a specimen from the back of the patient's throat (through the nose).

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

Whooping cough starts with the following cold-like symptoms:

- Runny or stuffed-up nose
- Sneezing
- Mild cough
- A pause in breathing in infants

After 1 to 2 weeks, the cough gradually becomes more severe:

- Children and babies may cough very hard over and over in bursts or fits.
- When **children** gasp for breath after a coughing fit, they make a "whooping" sound. That's how whooping cough got its name.
- **Babies** may not make this "whooping" sound.
- Coughing fits make it hard to breathe, eat, drink, and sleep.
- Coughing fits happen more at night.
- Babies and young children may turn blue while coughing from lack of oxygen.
- Coughing fits can last for up to 10 weeks, and sometimes recur with the next lung infection.

Is there a treatment for whooping cough? Antibiotics are necessary in treating people with whooping cough. The drug of choice is usually a form of erythromycin. Supportive care such as bed rest and fluids is also needed. People with whooping cough should stay home from school or work until the antibiotic treatment is completed.

How does whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough spreads easily through the air when an infected person breathes, coughs, or sneezes. Many babies and young children get whooping cough from adults or older brothers or sisters who don't

know they have the infection. Pregnant women with whooping cough can give it to their newborn babies.

How long is a person with whooping cough contagious?

People with whooping cough are most contagious during the first stage of infection (when cold-like symptoms occur) and during the first two weeks after onset of the cough (approximately 21 days).

How long does it take to show symptoms of whooping cough after being exposed?

The incubation period of whooping cough is usually 7 to 10 days, with a range of 4–21 days.

Can you get whooping cough more than once?

Re-infection appears to be uncommon but does occur. With natural infection, immunity to pertussis will likely disappear as soon as seven years following disease; re-infection may present as a persistent cough, rather than typical whooping cough.

How serious is whooping cough?

Whooping cough can be a very serious disease. It is most dangerous for infants and young children who may suffer complications such as:

- Pneumonia
- Seizures
- Brain damage
- Death

Although older children and adults are less likely than infants to become seriously ill with whooping cough, most make several visits to their health care provider for medical care and miss school and work.

What other steps can be taken to prevent the spread of whooping cough?

An antibiotic effective against pertussis should be given to all household and other close contacts of persons with whooping cough, regardless of how old they are or whether they are up-to-date on pertussis vaccine.

In addition, if they have not already done so, all close contacts of persons with whooping cough younger than seven years of age should complete their DTaP vaccine series. If they have completed their primary four dose series, but have not had a dose within the last three years, they should be given a booster dose. People age 10 years and older should receive a dose of Tdap if they haven't received it already.

Can a pregnant woman receive Tdap vaccine?

Yes. All pregnant women who have not previously received Tdap should be vaccinated in the third or late second trimester (more than 20 weeks gestation). Because infants are not adequately protected against pertussis until they have received at least 3 doses of DTaP, it is especially important that **all contacts** of infants younger than age 12 months are vaccinated against pertussis. If a new mother hasn't been vaccinated with Tdap, she should receive it before hospital discharge, even if she is breastfeeding.

Who should not receive these vaccines?

Generally, any person who has had a serious allergic reaction to a *vaccine component* or to a previous dose of DTaP or Tdap vaccine should not receive another dose.

Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns. My direct line at the department is 402-826-6685. My cell phone, at which I am available 24/7, is 402-641-0536.

Kate Lange, RN, BSN
Disease Surveillance Nurse

