

Pertussis Facts

updated 2019

What is pertussis?

- Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a respiratory disease caused by bacteria. It often causes serious problems in babies, but is usually milder in older children and adults.

Who gets pertussis?

- Pertussis can occur at any age, but infants and young children are at the highest risk of life-threatening consequences. In Oregon, many pertussis cases occur in newborns that are too young to be immunized.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

- The first symptoms---runny nose, sneezing, mild fever and cough---usually appear five to 21 days after a person is infected.
- After one or two weeks, the cough gets worse and usually starts to occur in strong fits of coughing. This may last six weeks or longer.
- In children, coughing fits are often followed by a whooping sound as they try to catch their breath.
- After coughing, infected people may have difficulty catching their breath, vomit or become blue in the face from lack of air. The coughing spells may be so severe that it is hard for babies to eat, drink or breathe.

How is pertussis spread?

- Bacteria live in the nose, mouth and throat, and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks.
- Touching a tissue or sharing a cup can also spread the disease.
- Older adolescents, adults and parents who may have a mild illness can spread the disease to infants and young children in the household.

Is pertussis dangerous?

- Pertussis can be very dangerous for infants who have the highest risk of pertussis-related complications and death.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

- A doctor may diagnosis pertussis based on symptoms and laboratory tests.

How do you treat it?

- Pertussis is treated with antibiotics.

How do you prevent pertussis?

Immunization is the best way to prevent pertussis. Children need a series of five DTaP vaccinations starting at 2 months of age until kindergarten. Immunity wears off, so adolescents and adults need a Tdap booster shot. The booster helps protect adolescents and adults from getting pertussis and spreading it to vulnerable infants. Pertussis vaccines are required for school and child care attendance in Oregon. Pregnant women should ask their health care provider about getting a Tdap booster in their third trimester of each pregnancy to protect their babies.

- Cover your cough and wash your hands.
- Keep babies away from anyone who is coughing.

Is the pertussis vaccine safe?

- Yes, the vaccine is safe though there is a slight risk of problems such as a pain and swelling at the injection site or fever. But the risk of the disease is much more serious.

Is there any pertussis in Oregon?

- Yes. In 2012 Oregon experienced a pertussis epidemic with the most cases seen since 1953.

Where can I get more information?

- Ask your health care provider, contact your local health department or visit the Oregon Immunization Program's website at www.healthoregon.org/imm. To find out where to get a pertussis vaccination, call SafeNet at 211.