

Pertussis (whooping cough)

Description

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a highly infectious disease caused by infection of the throat with the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. It affects infants, children and adults.

The disease usually starts like a cold, with a runny nose, tiredness and sometimes a mild fever. A cough then develops, usually in short bouts followed by a deep gasp (or 'whoop'). Not every person makes the whooping sound—this is more common in non-immunised children. The cough can last up to 3 months.

Young infants may stop breathing and sometimes turn blue. Adolescents and adults may just have a persistent cough. One in four children will also develop pneumonia; some have fits (convulsions); and some may develop inflammation of the brain (encephalitis). Pertussis is particularly serious in children under 12 months of age, and hospitalisation is often necessary.

How does it spread?

Pertussis spreads by airborne droplets. It can also spread indirectly by contact with surfaces that have been contaminated by infectious airborne droplets (e.g. hands, tissues, toys, eating utensils).

Incubation period

The incubation period is usually 9–10 days, but may range from 6 to 20 days.

Infectious period

A person is infectious from the beginning of the cold-like symptoms. They may remain infectious for up to 3 weeks if untreated, or until they have been treated with an appropriate antibiotic for 5 full days.

Exclusion period

Children with pertussis should be excluded for 21 days from the onset of symptoms, or until they have taken an appropriate antibiotic for at least 5 days.

Responsibilities of educators and other staff

- Contact your local public health unit for advice.
- Advise the parent to keep the child at home until they are feeling well and have taken an appropriate antibiotic for at least 5 days; or keep the child at home for 21 days from the onset of symptoms.
- Review vaccination records of all staff and children.
- Make sure staff and children practise cough and sneeze etiquette and hand hygiene.
- Ensure that appropriate cleaning practices are being followed in the education and care service.

Responsibilities of parents

- Make sure children are fully vaccinated against pertussis.
- Keep the child at home until they are feeling well and have taken an appropriate antibiotic for at least 5 days; or keep them at home for 21 days from the onset of symptoms. Avoid contact with other children during this time.
- Notify friends and contacts that the child has been diagnosed with pertussis, and advise them to contact their doctor.
- Encourage cough and sneeze etiquette and hand hygiene at home.

Controlling the spread of infection

- Pertussis is a vaccine-preventable disease, and fully immunised communities offer the best protection against pertussis.
- Teach children about cough and sneeze etiquette.
 - Cough or sneeze into your inner elbow rather than your hand.
 - If you used a tissue to cover your nose or mouth when sneezing or coughing, put the tissue in the bin straight away.
 - Clean your hands.
- Ensure that staff practise cough and sneeze etiquette and effective hand hygiene.
- Ensure that appropriate cleaning practices are being followed.

Treatment

Pertussis can be treated with antibiotics.