

Let's Talk About...

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Whooping cough is caused by contact with a bacteria called *bordetella pertussis* (per-tuss-iss). It is very contagious, and adults and children can catch this disease. People with pertussis, cough often, very forcefully, and mostly at night. A whooping sound may follow the coughing. It is also common to throw up after coughing. Your child's face may turn red or blue during the coughing spells. Between coughing spells, your child may look well. Whooping cough can last for weeks.

Pertussis causes a buildup of mucus, which can lead to breathing problems. Children younger than 5 years old who have not been vaccinated are more likely to catch whooping cough. Infants are especially at risk, because they may develop bleeding in the brain as a result of severe coughing. Coughing can make it hard for a child to eat, drink, or breathe.

How do you prevent whooping cough?

The best way to protect your child is with the pertussis vaccine. Your child should begin getting the vaccine at 2 months old. They should then get booster shots at 4 months, 6 months, and 15 months. Your child gets the final booster shot when they begin school. Make sure your child gets all the booster shots.

This vaccine schedule provides protection until about age 11. After that, people gradually lose their protection from pertussis and should get a different vaccine called Tdap. This stands for tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. All pregnant women should get a Tdap shot during each pregnancy.

How do you treat whooping cough?

Your child's doctor will test your child's nasal mucus to see if they have the bacteria. The doctor will recommend an antibiotic, usually azithromycin, for your child and everyone who has had close contact with them. This includes any household members or frequent visitors, such as grandparents, because of their exposure to the bacteria.

What happens in the hospital?

Children admitted to the hospital for pertussis are usually there for about a week. Your child will be in a separate room, and everyone who goes into the room must wear a mask, gloves, and gown. Your child may receive oxygen to help them breathe and a clear liquid diet if they vomit a lot.

When your child is coughing less, usually after a couple of weeks, they can start to do normal activities and eat normal foods. Your child may have a mild cough for months.

Complications

Pneumonia is the most frequent pertussis complication, but seizures, malnutrition and death may also occur.

Call your doctor if...

- Your child has a hard time swallowing or is drooling.
- Your child is having considerable breathing difficulty which causes them to be restless and sleepless.
- Your child complains of an earache or pulls at their ears as an infant.
- Your child's temperature rises above 104°F, 102°F (for infants), or if your child has a prolonged fever.
- You have any concerns about your child's breathing.

