Let's Talk About...

Whooping cough (Pertussis)

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

Pertussis causes a buildup of mucous, which can lead to breathing problems. Children less than five years old who have not been vaccinated are most likely to catch whooping cough. Young infants are especially at risk because they may develop bleeding in the brain as a result of severe coughing. Coughing can be so bad that it is 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 two months of age. Then she should get booster shots at four months, six months, 15 months, and when she begins school. Your child must have all the booster shots. This vaccine schedule provides protection until about age 11. After that, people gradually lose their protection from pertussis and they should get a different vaccine called tdap. It is now recommended that all pregnant women get a tdap during each pregnancy.

How do you treat whooping cough?

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

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 room by herself, and everyone who goes into the room must wear masks and wash their hands. See ***Let's Talk About... Isolation*** for important information. Your child may receive oxygen to help her breathe. She may get a clear liquid diet if she vomits a lot.

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

Complications

The most frequent complication of pertussis is pneumonia, 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 so much difficulty breathing that she is restless and cannot sleep.
- Your child complains of an earache or, if she is an infant, she pulls at her ears.
- Your child's temperature goes above 104°F (40°C) or 102°F (38.5°C) if she is an infant, or your child has had a prolonged fever.
- You have any concerns about your child's breathing.

Go to the nearest hospital if...

- Your child lacks enough energy to eat, talk, or do simple tasks.
- Your child refuses to swallow or lie down.
- Your child has noisy breathing at rest.
- Your child can't breathe.

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Pediatric Education Services, 801.662.3500 | Rev. 04/13, LTA520407990 | *Available in Spanish*