

Know the FACTS

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Whooping cough, also known as pertussis, is a highly contagious respiratory illness that often begins like a common cold but can cause prolonged coughing fits that last for weeks or even months. Babies under one year old and people with existing health conditions are at the highest risk for serious complications.

How whooping cough spreads

Whooping cough spreads easily when an infected person coughs or sneezes, releasing *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria into the air that others then breathe. It spreads most easily among people who spend a lot of time in close contact or share the same air.

A person can spread the bacteria at the onset of symptoms and for at least two weeks after the coughing begins, even if their symptoms are mild and they don't realize they're sick. Many babies catch whooping cough from parents, siblings or caregivers who don't know they are infected.



Symptoms of whooping cough

Symptoms usually appear 5–10 days after exposure to the bacteria, but they can take up to 3 weeks to develop.

Early symptoms

Early on, whooping cough appears similar to a common cold and often goes unsuspected until more severe symptoms appear. Early symptoms can last 1-2 weeks and usually include the following:

- runny or stuffed-up nose
- low-grade fever (less than 100.4°F)
- mild, occasional cough

For some babies, whooping cough may seem like a common cold for the entire illness, instead of just at the beginning. **However, many babies with whooping cough don't cough at all. Instead, they may have apnea, or life-threatening pauses in breathing.** The apnea may cause cyanosis (a blue discoloration of the skin, lips or nails) or they may struggle to breathe.

Later symptoms

About 1-2 weeks after the first symptoms start, people may develop paroxysms, also known as **coughing fits**. These coughing fits usually last 1-6 weeks but can last for up to 10 weeks. The cough generally gets worse and becomes more common as the illness continues.

Coughing fits can cause people to do the following:

- make a high-pitched "whoop" when they inhale
- vomit during or afterward
- feel very tired afterward, even if they seem well between fits
- have difficulty sleeping at night
- struggle to breathe
- fracture or break a rib

Many who experience these coughing fits say it's the worst cough of their lives.

Preventing whooping cough

Doctors and medical experts agree that vaccination is the best way to prevent pertussis in individuals and control the spread of the Bordetella bacteria among people. The Ohio Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control have published recommendations regarding immunization, saying that babies and children, pre-teens and teens, adults, and people who are pregnant are encouraged to get the vaccine.

Studies show that immunization works well but protection can fade over time and a booster dose may need to be administered. Individuals should consult with their doctor or another healthcare professional about immunizations.

Treatment and recovery

It's very important to **treat whooping cough early, before coughing fits begin**.

Healthcare providers generally treat whooping cough with antibiotics. Further treatment in the hospital may be required if symptoms are serious.

To help prevent illness, antibiotics—also called postexposure prophylaxis (PEP)—are given after someone is exposed to harmful bacteria. Some people should receive PEP if they've been around someone with whooping cough. If you've been exposed, talk to a healthcare provider about whether you need preventive antibiotics.

Additional resources

- **Ohio Department of Health:**
bit.ly/ODHWhoopingCough
- **American Academy of Pediatrics (Healthy Children initiative):**
bit.ly/AAPPertussis
- **Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC):** cdc.gov/pertussis

