

MOORE COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT
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PERTUSSIS FACT SHEET

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as Whooping Cough, is a highly contagious bacterial infection that causes severe coughing spells that may end in a “whooping” sound when the infected person breathes in, especially in children.

How is it spread?

- Pertussis is spread to close contacts through droplets from the mouth and nose when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks.
- Persons treated with antibiotics are contagious until the first 5 days of appropriate antibiotic treatment are completed.

Who gets pertussis?

- Pertussis can infect persons of all ages, but is most serious in infants and young children.
- Unimmunized or inadequately immunized people are at higher risk for severe disease.
- Many cases occur in adults and older children because protection from the vaccine lasts only 5 to 10 years after the last dose.

What are the symptoms?

- Symptoms may appear between 6 to 21 days (average 7-10) after exposure to an infected person.
- Pertussis usually begins with cold symptoms (runny nose, cough) followed by episodes of severe coughing that can last 1 to 2 months.
- Vomiting may occur after coughing spells.
- The person may look and feel healthy between coughing episodes.
- Immunized school children, adolescents and adults have milder symptoms than young children.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

- A person can transmit pertussis from onset of symptoms to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes.
- The period of communicability is reduced to 5 days after antibiotic therapy is begun.

What are the complications?

- Pertussis is most dangerous to infants less than 1 year of age who may develop pneumonia, loss of appetite, dehydration, seizures, and rarely, brain damage or death.
- Serious complications are less likely in older children and adults.

What is the treatment?

- Ask your healthcare provider for treatment options if you think your child may have pertussis.
- Antibiotics are used to treat and prevent spread of pertussis to others.
- Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration (loss of fluids).

How can pertussis be prevented?

- Routine immunization is the best preventive measure.
- Persons with pertussis should stay home and avoid close contact with others until 5 days of antibiotic treatment for pertussis are completed at which time they are no longer contagious.
- If you live with, or have close contact with someone who has pertussis you might need to take antibiotics to prevent pertussis—contact your health care provider.
- Persons with any cough illness should avoid contact with infants and expectant mothers, including visiting or working in labor, delivery, and nursery areas of hospitals and in child care settings.
- Follow good hygiene measures (washing hands, covering nose/mouth when coughing, staying home when sick).