

Pertussis Fact Sheet

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (also known as whooping cough) is a bacterial infection that causes a severe cough. Although it is generally not serious in older children and adults, it can be very serious in young children and infants. It is important to identify pertussis early on in children and adults in order to prevent spread to younger children.

What are the signs and symptoms of pertussis?

Individuals with pertussis generally start out with mild cold symptoms including a dry cough followed after about 2 weeks by severe coughing episodes. Severe coughing can be accompanied by a characteristic whooping sound as the person tries to catch their breath. In between coughing episodes, most people feel well. Coughing is usually worse at night and many individuals will gag or vomit after severe coughing spells. Infants may not have the severe coughing but may have difficulty breathing, difficulty feeding and a milder cough.

What medical treatment is needed?

Pertussis can be treated with antibiotics. It is important to diagnose individuals with pertussis as early as possible to prevent spreading to infants and children and others who are not immunized or whose immunity from vaccination may be wearing off.

Is pertussis contagious?

Pertussis is highly contagious and is spread through droplets when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. Individuals with pertussis are usually contagious from the time that they develop cold symptoms until 3 weeks after the coughing episodes start.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Vaccination against pertussis is the best way to prevent spread of the disease. Immunity from vaccination lasts about 5-10 years so repeat vaccination of older children and adults has been recommended. Early diagnosis and treatment will also prevent spread by avoiding contact between the infected person and those who have not been immunized, have been partially immunized or have not been immunized for more than 10 years. Individuals in close contact with someone infected with pertussis may receive antibiotics to prevent infection and further spread.

For additional information, contact your health care professional or:

Gwinnett County Department of Health – (770) 339-4260
GCPS Office of Health and Social Services – (678) 301-7270

(Adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; Kings County Dept. of Health, 2007, Washington State Department of Health , 2008)