Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is whooping cough?

"Whooping cough" (pertussis) is a highly contagious disease caused by a bacterial infection.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

The disease might start like the common cold, with stuffy nose, sneezing, and maybe mild cough or fever. But after 1–2 weeks, severe coughing can begin. If you have whooping cough, you may cough so hard that you gag or vomit. Coughing may be worse at night. Someone with whooping cough may look and feel healthy between coughing episodes.

Infants and children with pertussis often have severe coughing spells that make it hard for them to eat, drink, breathe, and sleep. Whooping cough is most serious for infants – if they have difficulty breathing they may turn bluish. Infants under three months might not have a cough.

How soon do symptoms start?

Symptoms appear 6 to 21 days (average 7-10 days) after exposure to an infected person.

How can whooping cough be treated?

Antibiotics can treat whooping cough (pertussis) and prevent the spread of infection to others, especially when given soon after the start of illness.

How does whooping cough (pertussis) spread?

Whooping cough is very contagious. It spreads easily by coughing or sneezing. Babies often get it from family members who may only have a mild cough and not know they have whooping cough. Untreated, people with whooping cough can spread the infection for as long as three weeks. People with whooping cough should stay out of school, child care or work until 1) they have finished 5 days of antibiotics, or 2) three weeks have passed since the cough started, or 3) the cough is completely gone.

Who is most at risk of serious illness from whooping cough (pertussis)?

People of all ages can get whooping cough, but infants are at greatest risk of severe illness, hospitalization and death. Pregnant women with whooping cough near the time of delivery may spread it to their newborns.

What is the best protection against whooping cough?

The best way to prevent whooping cough (pertussis) is to get vaccinated. Getting the vaccine also prevents the spread to babies. Parents can also help protect infants by keeping them away as much as possible from anyone who has cold symptoms or is coughing. If you've had close contact with someone with whooping cough, you can also take antibiotics to prevent infection.

Why is it important to get whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine?

Vaccine is the best way to protect yourself and it prevents the disease from spreading to infants, pregnant women, and others. Talk to your health care provider to make sure all children, teens and adults are up-to-date with whooping cough vaccine.
Whooping cough vaccine prevents disease and saves lives

Whooping cough cases and deaths have been reduced by over 90% through widespread use of routine whooping cough vaccination, but as vaccination rates have declined, we've see rises in whooping cough.

Who should get whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine?

- Babies and young children need 5 doses of DTaP vaccine for full protection. Doses should be given at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15 - 18 months and 4 - 6 years.
- Older children, teens, and adults can help protect themselves and prevent the spread to babies by getting a Tdap booster vaccine.
- Pregnant women should receive Tdap with each pregnancy, preferably between 27 -36 weeks gestation. If not given during pregnancy, new moms should get Tdap before leaving the hospital after giving birth.

How can I get a whooping cough vaccine?

Whooping cough vaccine for older children, teens, and adults (known as the Tdap booster) is available through many health care providers and pharmacies. Most health insurance carriers will cover the whooping cough vaccine, but adults should double-check with their health plan.

How can I get my child vaccinated against whooping cough?

Vaccines are offered at no cost for children under 19 through health care providers participating in the state's Childhood Vaccine Program. The whooping cough vaccine for young children, known as Dtap, is one of the routine vaccines given during childhood. If you need information on health insurance or help finding a healthcare provider, call the Family Health Hotline at 1-800-322-2588 or visit www.parenthelp123.org.

- Report all King County cases to Public Health by calling 206-296-4774.
- Printer-friendly version

For King County health care providers:

- Pertussis is a notifiable condition in King County. Please see disease reporting requirements
  (http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/communicable/providers/reporting.aspx#requirements).
- Information on health advisories, resources and guidelines