
WHOOPING COUGH: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

July 30, 2010



What is Whooping Cough?

Whooping cough (pertussis), is an easily spread infectious disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. In the past, whooping cough was common and caused a lot of deaths in children. After a whooping cough vaccine was made, the number of people with whooping cough decreased.

Why has there been so much talk about whooping cough this year?

This year a lot more people have gotten whooping cough. A whooping cough outbreak was announced in California in June 2010. There have also been more deaths from whooping cough. All of the deaths have been in children less than 6 months old.

People of all ages can get whooping cough but babies are most in danger of having problems from it. The most common problem is pneumonia. Pneumonia is one of the big reasons why babies die from whooping cough. Other problems are seizures and brain damage.

How does whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough is spread by tiny wet drops produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks. People with whooping cough can spread the disease from the time they get a runny nose until 3 weeks after their cough starts. People with whooping cough can prevent spreading the disease if they take the right antibiotics.

Older children and adults, including parents, often have mild disease. They can spread whooping cough and not know it. This is because they do not feel very sick so they do not see a doctor or get treated. People with whooping cough should get treated with antibiotics. They should avoid close contact with others, especially babies and pregnant women, until they have taken 5 days of the right antibiotics.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting sick with whooping cough?

There are three ways to protect yourself and your family from getting whooping cough:

1. Vaccine

The best way to protect yourself and your family from getting sick is to get vaccinated. Shots for whooping cough are started as a baby. These shots continue through childhood. The vaccine used for children is called DTaP. Because the vaccine wears off with time, young people and adults should also get a shot for whooping cough. The name of the vaccine for young people and adults is Tdap.

- All young people and adults should get the whooping cough vaccine (Tdap). This is especially important if you are around babies or pregnant women.
- Pregnant women should get the whooping cough vaccine (Tdap) either during pregnancy or immediately after birth. Tdap is considered safe during pregnancy.
- We recommend that adults age 65 and older also receive one shot of the whooping cough vaccine (Tdap). This is very important for adults 65 and older who are around babies or pregnant women. Tdap can be given at any time after your last tetanus shot (Td).
- Talk to your doctor to see if you should get the whooping cough vaccine.

2. Prevention

It is important for some people who have had close contact to a person with whooping cough to get antibiotic medications. These people include:

- Young children <1 year old
- Pregnant women
- People who have close contact with pregnant women and young children (including health care workers).

If you know that you or your family members have been around someone with whooping cough, contact your doctor. Close contact is defined as sharing toys, food, or utensils, face-to-face contact, direct exposure to cough, sneeze, or secretions, or sharing a closed space for over one hour.

3. Healthy Habits

All people should use healthy habits. Examples include washing your hands often, covering coughs and staying home when sick.

What are the symptoms and signs of whooping cough?

Whooping cough has 3 stages:

1. In the first stage there is runny nose, sneezing, a fever, and a mild cough that gets worse over 1-2 weeks.
2. During the second stage people have coughing attacks. At the end of each attack, there can be a high-pitched "whoop" sound. For an example of the sound please visit: http://health.utah.gov/epi/diseases/pertussis/pertussis_sounds.htm. This can be a dangerous stage for babies and young children. During coughing attacks they may turn blue and have difficulty breathing. Vomiting and tiredness can follow these cough attacks. This stage usually lasts 1-6 weeks.
3. In the third stage the cough slowly disappears over 2-3 weeks. Many people will have coughing attacks with later colds or other infections.

The whooping cough vaccine is very good but not 100% effective. Its protection goes away over time. People who have had whooping cough in the past or who have had a whooping cough vaccine can still get the disease. Their symptoms are different and are usually not as bad as those described above. It is important to think about whooping cough even if you have been vaccinated or had the illness in the past.

If you think that you have whooping cough you should talk to your doctor.

How is whooping cough treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat whooping cough. They are most helpful when started during the first stage of the disease. When taken early antibiotics can help with symptoms. If taken later antibiotics may not help with symptoms but can stop the spread of the disease.

The San Francisco Department of Health provides this guidance based on the best current information. Recommendations may change, and SF recommendations may sometimes differ from those issued by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or the California Department of Public Health. Visit our website for the most current updates, forms, FAQs and useful links: <http://www.sfdcp.org>