Fact Sheet

Pertussis

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a very contagious bacterial infection of the respiratory tract. Usually it causes a persistent cough that follows a normal cold. The cough occurs in explosive bursts ending with the typical high-pitched *whoop!* and occasionally vomiting. Between bursts of coughing the patient appears well. Coughing attacks may continue to occur for 10-12 weeks.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis is most common among babies, but anyone can get it. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose because the symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough, asthma, or bronchitis. Cases often occur in adolescents and adults because immunity can decrease with age. These older children/adults, who may have very mild symptoms, can spread the infection to susceptible groups.

Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

There is a vaccine that is recommended for all children and is given along with the vaccines for diphtheria and tetanus to infants beginning as early as six weeks of age. The vaccine does not provide life-long protection. However, immunization of young children is important because the most serious effects of the disease are most common among young children.

How does pertussis spread?

The bacterium is spread by direct contact with discharge from the nose or throat of an infected person, or by breathing in infected droplets in the air when an infected person coughs. The period of greatest risk of spreading droplets in the air when an infected person coughs. The period of greatest risk of spread is during the early "cold" stage.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms are like those of a cold: runny nose, sneezing, cough, and a low-grade fever. The cough becomes persistent for one to two weeks. Then the cough becomes worse, occurring in episodes of numerous rapid coughs followed by a whooping sound. The whoop may be absent in older children and adult cases though. These episodes may occur for one to two months and are more frequent at night.

Are there complications associated with pertussis?

Pertussis is frequently complicated by pneumonia, loss of appetite, and ear infections, particularly in infants. In severe cases, dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy (disorders of the brain), and apneic episodes (brief cessation of breathing). Death from pertussis is rare, and 80% of deaths occur in children under the age of one year.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually five to ten days but may be as long as 21 days.

When does a person become contagious?

A person can transmit pertussis to others from the beginning of the cold-like symptoms until about three weeks after the coughing starts. The amount of time a person can give it to others is reduced when antibiotics are given.

Does a person become immune after having pertussis?

Having pertussis usually provides immunity for many years, but it is generally not life-long.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat the infected person and their close contacts. In addition, it is helpful to get plenty of rest and fluids. Sometimes patients need to be hospitalized and receive special treatment for the coughing or for complications.

What can be done to prevent getting pertussis?

Antibiotics can be given to the household members and close contacts of people with pertussis to prevent them from getting sick.

Children should be vaccinated as infants. The vaccine cannot be given to people older than age six. When possible, babies should be kept away from people who are coughing, because they are most likely to become seriously ill. Babies with any coughing illness should see a health care provider.

For specific concerns about pertussis, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Infectious Disease Control at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov or the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website at www.dhhs.nh.gov .