

## Frequently Asked Questions About Whooping Cough (Pertussis) (December 2012)

### About whooping cough

#### What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a highly contagious illness caused by bacteria. It mainly affects the respiratory system (the organs that help you breathe).

#### Are whooping cough and pertussis the same thing?

Yes.

#### Who can get whooping cough?

People of all ages can get whooping cough.

#### How serious is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is very serious, especially for babies and young kids. Whooping cough can cause pneumonia, seizures, brain damage, and death.

#### What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

The symptoms differ depending on your age. Babies and young kids can have severe coughing spells that make it hard to eat, drink, breathe, or sleep. The cough is often followed by a “whooping” sound when breathing in. This sound is how the disease got its name. Some babies may turn blue because they don’t get enough oxygen and can’t catch their breath. Older kids and adults may have a bad cough, a runny nose, and a fever.

#### How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually start 5 to 21 days (average 7 to 10 days) after exposure.

#### How does whooping cough spread?

You can get whooping cough from breathing in the pertussis bacteria. This germ comes out of the mouth and nose when someone who has whooping cough coughs or sneezes.

#### How is whooping cough treated?

Whooping cough is treated with antibiotics. It’s important to start treatment as soon as possible to slow the spread of the disease.

#### How is whooping cough prevented?

Getting vaccinated is the best way to prevent whooping cough. Using good health manners also helps slow the spread of whooping cough — wash your hands, cover your cough, and stay home when you’re sick.

#### Are some people at higher risk from whooping cough?

Yes. Getting vaccinated against whooping cough is especially important for people who are considered high risk or who may expose someone who is high risk.

People at greatest risk from whooping cough include:

- Infants under one year old.
- Pregnant women (especially in their third trimester).
- Anyone who may expose infants under one year old or pregnant women to whooping cough (for example: members of a household with infants or pregnant women, child care workers who take care of infants under one year old, childbirth educators, and health

care workers who have face-to-face contact with infants under one year old or pregnant women).

### **How common is whooping cough in Alaska?**

Based on 2012 numbers, Alaska is currently experiencing a pertussis epidemic. See current [case counts](#) for updated case numbers.

### **I was exposed to someone who has whooping cough?**

See your health care provider as soon as possible. You may be given antibiotics that can stop you from getting the disease. Try to stay away from other people until treated (or until another diagnosis for the cough proves it's not contagious).

### **What should I do if I think someone in my family has whooping cough?**

If you think you or one of your family members has whooping cough, call your health care provider. Try to stay away from other people until your illness is treated (or another diagnosis for the cough proves it's not contagious). Whooping cough is a possibility if someone has a bad cough, especially if it lasts longer than two weeks, or if the coughing occurs in "spells" followed by gagging or difficulty catching the breath.

### **How should employers handle employees returning to work who have had whooping cough?**

Employers should talk with their Human Resources Office to understand their company policies, procedures, and labor agreements. Employers should not share individual employee health information with others.

### **Are there special cleaning requirements for whooping cough?**

No. Whooping cough usually spreads by breathing in the pertussis bacteria. This germ comes out of the mouth and nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes. While the pertussis bacteria can live on a surface or object for several days, most people do not get whooping cough by contact with that surface or object. Surfaces or objects that are shared by many people have germs on them. For people who live and work in spaces that are shared by many people, cleaning and disinfecting can help get rid of those germs. For most households and workplaces, this level of cleaning and disinfecting is not always possible or practical. The best protection is getting vaccinated. Also, try to stay away from people who are coughing and sneezing. If you are sick, try to stay away from people until your illness is treated; cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze; and wash your hands often.

### **About the whooping cough vaccine**

#### **What is the whooping cough vaccine?**

There are two vaccines for whooping cough:

- DTaP is for babies and young kids (birth to age seven).
- Tdap is for kids older than age seven, adolescents, and adults.

#### **Who needs the whooping cough vaccine?**

Whooping cough vaccine is important for people of all ages. If you aren't vaccinated, you aren't protected.

- Children two months to seven years old should get a five-shot series of the vaccine called DTaP. This vaccine is given at ages two months, four months, six months, 15 to 18 months, and four to six years old.

- Children seven to 10 years old who weren't fully vaccinated as a baby should get a one-time dose of a vaccine called Tdap. If they got all five shots as a baby, they do not need another one at this age.
- Teens 11 to 18 years old should get a booster of the Tdap vaccine.
- All adults should get a booster of the Tdap vaccine if they did not have one as a teenager. The vaccine is especially important for certain adults:
  - Pregnant women should get the Tdap vaccine in their late second or early third trimester if they did not have one as a teenager or adult.
  - Health care workers.
  - Anyone who cares for babies less than one year old.

### **How often should adults get the whooping cough vaccine?**

All adults should get a booster of the Tdap vaccine. If you had the Tdap vaccine as a teenager (age 11 or older), you don't need another one. Check with your health care provider to make sure you're current on your immunizations.

### **If I had whooping cough, should I still get vaccinated?**

Yes. When someone gets whooping cough, their body develops a natural immunity. However, it is unknown how long that immunity lasts for each person, so routine vaccination against whooping cough is recommended.

### **Why should I get vaccinated if I don't have close contact with babies?**

While you may not have direct contact with babies, you may be around them in public places such as the grocery store or the library. Babies often catch whooping cough from an adult or family member who may not know they have whooping cough. Babies who get whooping cough are often hospitalized and could die.

### **How well the vaccines work**

#### **Do the vaccines really work?**

Yes. The whooping cough vaccine is very effective at protecting us from severe and deadly disease.

### **How long does the DTaP vaccine for younger kids last?**

Recent studies show that the DTaP vaccine that young kids now get doesn't last as long as expected, and protection wears off over time. In the 1990s, the United States switched to a new whooping cough vaccine for kids. This vaccine (DTaP) causes fewer side effects than the old vaccine (DTP) but doesn't last as long. This may explain why there are more whooping cough cases in older children. Teens who are 13-15 years old today are the first group of kids to get only the newer DTaP vaccine as babies; they didn't get any doses of the old vaccine.

### **How long does the Tdap vaccine last?**

Vaccine experts aren't sure about that yet. There are more reported whooping cough cases among 13-14 year olds – a changing trend across the country that indicates a shorter duration for Tdap vaccine protection against whooping cough. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is evaluating how long the Tdap vaccine lasts and how well it protects people. The study will also look for any differences between kids who got the original DTP (whole cell) vs. the more recent DTaP (acellular) vaccines.

### **If the vaccine doesn't last very long, why should I be vaccinated?**

The vaccine we use now (DTaP) works very well for the first couple of years. Even after five years, people still have 70 percent protection from whooping cough. People who are vaccinated

and still get sick have a milder, shorter illnesses, and are less likely to spread the disease to others; this is especially important for babies. Infants who are too young to get vaccinated usually get whooping cough from a family member or caregiver. Infants are at the most risk for getting very sick and potentially dying from whooping cough.

### **If I got vaccinated, can I still get whooping cough?**

It's possible. Sometimes people don't fully respond to the vaccine and get whooping cough anyway, although it is usually a milder case. This can occur with any vaccine.

Vaccinated people who get whooping cough have milder symptoms, a shorter illness, and are less likely to spread the disease to other people.

### **How many vaccinated people are getting sick?**

There have been many whooping cough cases reported among people who've been vaccinated. That's not a surprise — it's known that the vaccine wears off over time. The percent varies by age range. For teens age 13-19 years, 77 percent of reported cases got the Tdap vaccine. For reported cases in children age 11-12 years old, 43 percent had received the Tdap vaccine. For children under age 10, 76 percent were up-to-date with the DTaP series. According to CDC, data from California's epidemic in 2010 showed that unvaccinated children are eight times more likely to get pertussis than fully vaccinated children.

### **How long are you protected if you get whooping cough?**

It's unclear how long immunity lasts but it's a fact that immunity wears off — whether the immunity came from getting the disease or from the vaccine. That's why experts recommend that all children and adults get vaccinated, even if they've had whooping cough.

### **Should I get vaccinated again if I had a Tdap shot a few years ago?**

The current recommendation is that everyone should get one dose of Tdap. CDC is looking at this issue very closely and recommendations may change.

### **Will vaccination recommendations change?**

It's possible that the recommendations might change over time as CDC evaluates vaccine information, data from large outbreaks like California in 2010, and other related factors to develop and adjust recommendations.

## **Vaccine safety and monitoring**

### **Is the vaccine safe?**

Research has shown that the whooping cough vaccine is very safe. You can get more information on the safety of the [DTaP vaccine](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

### **How is the vaccine monitored for safety?**

Vaccines go through extensive testing before they're licensed for use. Once a vaccine is in use, the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration always monitor the vaccine to make sure that it's safe and effective.

### **Are there side effects from the vaccine?**

Like any medication, vaccines may cause side effects. Most are mild:

- Pain, redness, or swelling at the injection site.
- Mild fever.
- Headache.
- Tiredness.

- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or stomach ache.
- Chills, body aches, sore joints, rash, or swollen glands (uncommon).

### **I'm unsure if I've had the Tdap vaccine; is it harmful to get it again?**

No. For most people, the benefits of protection against whooping cough outweigh the risk of any side effects. Check with your health care provider if you have specific concerns.

### **Where to get the whooping cough vaccine**

#### **Where can I get the whooping cough vaccine?**

There are many places that offer whooping cough vaccine:

- Your health care provider
- Most pharmacies
- [Public Health Centers\\*](#)

### **How to pay for the whooping cough vaccine**

#### **\*How can I pay for the vaccine if I'm uninsured?**

[Public Health Centers](#) can provide Tdap to under and uninsured adults effective 7/01/12. See [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\) Regarding State-Supplied Vaccines](#).

#### **Does Medicare cover the vaccine?**

Yes. Medicare Part D covers the cost of the adult vaccine (called Tdap) for adults aged 65 and older. Since it is a prescription drug benefit, coverage depends on the use of that benefit so far during the year. Call 1-800-633-4227 with questions about Medicare. Health care workers with questions should contact their patients' Part D plan for Part D vaccine information.

#### **Does Medicaid cover the vaccine?**

Yes. Medicaid covers the whooping cough vaccine per the recommended immunization schedule.

### **For pregnant women and new parents**

#### **If I'm pregnant, can I get the whooping cough vaccine?**

Yes. If you are pregnant and haven't received the vaccine booster as an adult (the adult vaccine is called Tdap), it's recommended that you do so. It's recommended that you get it after you are five months (20 weeks) pregnant. Getting vaccinated while pregnant may protect newborns until they're old enough to get vaccinated. Babies can't be vaccinated against whooping cough until they're about two months old and aren't fully protected until they've had the full five dose series, given on schedule.

#### **If I recently gave birth, can I get the whooping cough vaccine?**

Yes. If you just gave birth and you haven't received the vaccine booster as an adult (the adult vaccine is called Tdap), it's recommended that you do so immediately. Babies can't get vaccinated until they're about two months old and aren't fully protected until they've had the full five dose series, given on schedule. So, it's very important that you are vaccinated. Research shows that most babies get whooping cough from their mothers.

#### **Can I get the whooping cough vaccine if I'm breastfeeding?**

Yes. If you are breastfeeding and you haven't received the vaccine booster as an adult (the adult vaccine is called Tdap), it's recommended that you do so immediately.

**Does breastfeeding protect my baby from whooping cough?**

No. Getting vaccinated during pregnancy may offer some limited protection to babies. Mothers vaccinated with Tdap can pass protections to their babies through breastfeeding. Babies do not get full protection from whooping cough through breastfeeding. The best protection for your baby is making sure that you and others around the baby are current on your vaccinations and that your baby is vaccinated on schedule when old enough.

**For health care workers and providers****Is the whooping cough vaccine required for health care workers?**

There is no state law that requires health care workers to get the whooping cough vaccine. Some health care organizations have policies that require the staff to be vaccinated.

Adapted from Washington State Department of Health “Frequently asked questions about whooping cough (pertussis)”

Available at:

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/YouandYourFamily/IllnessandDisease/WhoopingCough/WhoopingCoughFAQ.aspx>