

Whooping Cough Fact Sheet for Patients and their Close Contacts

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a bacterial infection that causes a long-lasting cough. The disease usually starts with cold symptoms or a cough. It can turn into severe coughing spells followed by gagging or vomiting, and often a “whoop” sound when the ill person tries to catch their breath.

Not all people who get pertussis have the “whoop” with the cough, especially babies under 6 months. Infants with whooping cough may not even be able to cough — instead, they may have trouble feeding and breathing, and may turn blue. Infants are at highest risk for hospitalization and dying from the disease. Babies older than 6 months and kids with whooping cough often have severe coughing spells that make it hard for them to eat, drink, breathe, and sleep.

How does whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough spreads easily by coughing, sneezing, and even talking. If untreated, an infected person can spread whooping cough for several weeks.

My doctor says I have whooping cough. What should I do?

- Take your medicine as directed by your doctor.
- Until you’ve taken antibiotics for five days, stay home from work or school and away from pregnant women, children under 1, and others who have frequent contact with infants or pregnant women. If you choose not to take antibiotics, stay home for 21 days after your cough started.

I have whooping cough and have been in close contact with family, household members, and others. What should I tell them?

- Let them know you may have spread the infection to them.
- Tell them to call their health care provider to ask if they should take antibiotics to prevent the disease.
- Tell them to watch for symptoms for 21 days after the most recent exposure and stay home if they get sick.
- If they get sick, tell them to call their health care provider and stay away from children under 1, pregnant women, and anyone who might expose infants or pregnant women.
- Remind them to make sure their whooping cough vaccinations are up to date.
- For pregnant women, people in contact with infants under 1, or anyone who might expose infants or pregnant women, tell them to call their health care provider and ask about antibiotics to prevent the disease.

Where can I get more information about whooping cough?

- Your [local health agency](#)
- [Washington State Department of Health](#)
- [Pertussis \(Whooping Cough\) — What You Need to Know](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [Pertussis \(Whooping Cough\)](#) (National Foundation for Infectious Diseases)