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Pertussis Facts



What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a very contagious bacterial disease of the respiratory system. Pertussis is often brought home by an older sibling or adult.

What causes pertussis?

Pertussis is spread through the air by droplets or by coming in contact with discharges from the nose/throat of an infected person. It spreads very easily between people, especially before the coughing spasms begin.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Symptoms can take 7 to 20 days to appear after contact with a person with pertussis. Symptoms include: runny nose and irritating cough followed in one to two weeks

by violent bouts of coughing (spasms) which last several minutes and may be followed by a crowing or “whoop” sound. The whooping sound may be absent in infants less than six months old, adolescents and adults. The coughing spasm often ends with a clear mucous discharge and vomiting. This cough may continue for one to two months or longer. A child can turn red from the effort of coughing or blue from not breathing properly. Pertussis may lead to pneumonia and swelling of the brain in infants and young children. In rare cases it can cause death. Infants younger than six months and people with severe infection may need to be hospitalized.

Who is most at risk for pertussis?

Pertussis can happen in individuals of all ages, but is most severe in the very young, especially infants under one year of age.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat pertussis and, if used, the contagious period is usually five days. Without antibiotics, the time that the person is contagious is about three weeks. If a person has pertussis, a public health nurse will call the contacts of that person to make sure they receive treatment if needed.

How can I reduce the risk of pertussis?

Pertussis immunization is part of the routine childhood and adolescent immunizations. Complete immunization is the most important way to prevent pertussis.

Anyone who has a persistent cough should be seen by their family doctor. People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from young children, infants, and women in their third trimester of pregnancy until properly treated.

If a person has pertussis, they should stay out of daycare/preschool/school until they have taken at least five days of the seven day course of antibiotics.

Close contacts less than seven years of age who are not yet fully immunized should see their health care provider as soon as possible.

