

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

According to the Tarrant County Public Health Department, Tarrant County has experienced a significant increase in the number of reported Pertussis (Whooping Cough) cases since the beginning of 2008.

What Is Pertussis or Whooping Cough?

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a highly contagious disease marked by severe coughing. It is named after the "whoop" sound children and adults sometimes make when they try to breathe in during or after a severe coughing spell.

What are the Symptoms?

- Whooping cough usually starts with cold- or flu-like symptoms, such as runny nose, sneezing, fever, and a mild cough. These symptoms can last up to 2 weeks and are followed by increasingly severe coughing spells. Fever, if present, is usually mild.
- During a classic coughing spell:
 - signature "whoop" is heard as the patient struggles to breathe
 - coughs usually produce a thick, productive mucus
 - vomiting may occur
 - lips and nails may turn blue due to lack of oxygen
 - patient is left exhausted after the coughing spell
- Mild pertussis disease is difficult to diagnose because its symptoms mimic those of a cold. Usually a prolonged cough is present, but without the "whoop."
- Milder symptoms usually affect all age groups, but are increasing among school children.
- The coughing attacks may last for many months in the "classic illness" or just a few days in the mild form of the disease.

Symptoms appear between 6 to 21 days (average 7-10) after exposure to the bacteria.

What are Some Potential Complications?

- Young infants are at highest risk for pertussis-related complications, including seizures, encephalopathy (swelling of the brain), otitis media (severe ear infection), anorexia (severe restriction of food intake) and dehydration.

In adolescents and adults, whooping cough can cause severe coughing that can make it hard to breathe, eat, or sleep, and can result in cracked ribs, pneumonia, or hospitalization.

How is it Spread?

- Whooping cough is caused by a bacteria that is found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person, and is spread through close contact when an infected person talks, sneezes, or coughs.
- It is most contagious during the first 2 to 3 weeks of infection, often before the beginning of severe coughing spells.
- Vaccine protection against whooping cough does not last forever. The vaccination most people received as children wears off, typically by adolescence. Therefore, adolescents and adults are at risk for whooping cough and can spread the infection to infants and young children in the household.

Who Gets It?

- Whooping cough (pertussis) can occur at any age, but infants and young children are at highest risk of life-threatening consequences.
- Recent outbreaks have shown that adolescents and adults carry the disease, which in its milder form is hard to recognize. Undiagnosed mild disease contributes to the spread of the illness among infants and young children.
- Persons with mild whooping cough can transmit the illness to un-immunized and partially immunized infants and young children who are more susceptible to severe illness and complications, such as pneumonia, encephalitis, and seizures.
- Anyone - particularly infants and young children - who is un-immunized is at a higher risk for severe whooping cough.

How Do You Treat It?

- Whooping cough is treated with antibiotics and patients are advised to take all prescribed medication and avoid contact with anyone, particularly small infants and children.

Ask your health care provider for treatment options if you think you or your child may have whooping cough.

How Do You Prevent It?

- While there is no lifelong protection against whooping cough, immunization is the best preventive measure. There is a vaccine to help protect you and your child against whooping cough.
- Consult your health care provider to be sure you and your family have been vaccinated.

Please refer to the Center for Disease Control website at cdc.gov or pertussis.com for more information.