



Public Health Fact Sheet - Pertussis

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious disease of the respiratory tract. It is caused by a bacterium that is found in the mouth, nose and throat of an infected person. Between 1995 and 2000 an average of 84 cases were reported each year in Michigan, but many cases may go unrecognized and unreported. In 2003 140 cases were reported in the state; however, many more may have been undiagnosed or unreported.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. Severe illness is more common in young children who have not been immunized. Older children or adults with pertussis usually have milder symptoms. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in very young infants, teens, and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is mostly spread when infected people cough or sneeze, expelling droplets that contain the pertussis germs. Touching contaminated objects such as tissues or cups can also spread the disease. Infants often get the disease from older siblings or adults.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. At first, symptoms resemble those of a common cold, with sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. After a couple of weeks the cough becomes more severe and uncontrolled. Coughing spells may be intense and followed by a crowing or high-pitched whoop. Thick, clear mucus may be discharged. The person may vomit during the coughing spell, or become blue in the face from lack of air. Between coughing spells the person often appears well. These episodes may recur for one to two months, and are more frequent at night.

Young children who have not been immunized have the most severe symptoms. Infants less than six months of age, adolescents and adults often do not have the characteristic whoop.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The first symptoms usually appear about 7 to 10 days after being exposed, but may be as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

A person can transmit pertussis from about 7 days following exposure to an infected person to about 3 weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. By taking antibiotics the contagious period is reduced to about 5 days from the start of treatment.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may think a patient has pertussis because of the symptoms, but a sample of mucus must be taken from the back of the nose for testing. A laboratory then tests the sample to determine whether the patient has pertussis.

Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

One attack usually provides immunity for many years, but immunity may fade with time.

What are the complications associated with pertussis?

Complications of pertussis may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy (disorders of the brain), apneic episodes (brief cessation of breathing) and death. Eighty percent of deaths occur in children under age one.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics can make the disease milder if they are started early enough, and will help prevent the illness from being spread to others. Household contacts and other close contacts to a case should also be given antibiotics to prevent the disease, even if they were vaccinated. In addition, it is helpful to get plenty of rest and fluids. Treatment for young children may include supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation to help the child during the prolonged period of coughing.

Is there a vaccine for pertussis?

Yes. The vaccine for pertussis is given as part of a combination vaccine that also protects against diphtheria and tetanus and possibly other diseases. Doctors recommend that the vaccine be given at two, four, six months, and 15-18 months of age, with an additional dose at 4-6 years of age.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

The single most effective way to prevent pertussis and its spread is by achieving the highest possible level of immunization in the community. People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from others, especially young children and infants, until properly treated.