

Pertussis, a respiratory illness commonly known as whooping cough, is a very contagious disease caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis* that can spread through respiratory droplets when coughing or sneezing. An infected person is most contagious up to 2 weeks after the cough begins. Many babies who get pertussis are infected by older siblings, parents, or caregivers who might not even know they have the disease. Pertussis is on the rise in the Austin area, and several cases have been reported in South Austin since November 2018.

Prevention

The most effective way to protect against whooping cough (pertussis) is by getting the diphtheriatetanus-pertussis vaccine (called DTaP). Doctors recommend that all children get the vaccine. While pertussis vaccines are the most effective tool to prevent this disease, no vaccine is 100% effective, and vaccine protection for this disease fades with time. Routine vaccinations through adulthood are important.

- **Infants and children** should receive 5 doses of DTaP by the age of 4-6 years old (vaccine required for school entry)
- **Adolescents** should receive a single dose of Tdap, preferably at 11 to 12 years of age
- **Pregnant women** should receive a single dose of Tdap during every pregnancy, preferably at 27 - 36 weeks gestation
- **Adults** should receive a single dose of Td every 10 years

Signs and Symptoms

Pertussis outbreaks in daycare and school settings mostly have resulted from failure to recognize and treat the disease. People that are vaccinated can still get sick but the symptoms are milder. The disease usually starts with cold-like symptoms and maybe a mild cough or fever. In babies, the cough can be minimal or not even there. Pertussis is most dangerous for babies.

Early symptoms can last for 1 to 2 weeks and usually include:

- Runny nose
- Low-grade fever (generally minimal throughout the course of the disease)
- Mild, occasional cough
- Apnea – a pause in breathing (in babies)

Later-Stage Symptoms may appear after 1-2 weeks and include:

- Fits of rapid coughs followed by a high-pitched “whoop” sound (made when gasping for breath after the cough fit that leaves you out of breath)
- Vomiting during or after the coughing fit
- Exhaustion after coughing fit

The coughing fits can continue for 10 weeks or more. The “whoop” is often not there if you have a milder disease.

Complications

Pertussis (whooping cough) can cause serious and sometimes deadly complications in babies and young children, especially those who have not received all recommended pertussis vaccines. More than 50% of babies with reported cases of pertussis must be hospitalized. Coughing can be so severe that it is hard for babies to eat, drink or breathe.

Of the hospitalized infants:

- 1 in 4 get pneumonia
- 1 in 100 will have convulsions (violent shaking)
- 3 in 5 will have slowed or stopped breathing
- 1 in 100 will die

Teens and adults can also get complications from pertussis. They are usually less serious in this older age group, especially in those who have been vaccinated with a pertussis vaccine

Diagnosis and Treatment

Healthcare providers generally treat pertussis with antibiotics and early treatment is very important. Treatment may make your infection less serious if you start it early, before coughing fits begin. Treatment can also help prevent spreading the disease to close contacts (people who have spent a lot of time around the infected person).

Where can I learn more?

Your child’s doctor or nurse can give you more information about the Tdap vaccine and the other vaccines your child may need. There is also information on CDC’s Vaccines for Preteens and Teens website at www.cdc.gov/vaccines/teens.