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Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called "whooping cough," is a highly contagious bacterial infection that causes coughing.

Who gets pertussis?

Anyone can get pertussis. In babies, pertussis can be life threatening. Babies often get pertussis from older children or adults whose symptoms are milder.

What are the symptoms for pertussis?

Pertussis may begin like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever, and cough. After one to two weeks, the cough gets worse and usually starts occurring in strong coughing fits. This type of coughing may last for six or more weeks. There is generally no fever during this time in young children. Cough fits are often followed by a "whooping" sound as they try to catch their breath. After coughing, a person may vomit, have difficulty catching their breath, or become blue in the face. The coughing spells may be so bad that it is hard for babies to eat, drink, or breathe. The cough is often worse at night, and cough medicines usually do not help reduce the cough. Between coughing spells, the person often appears to be well. Some babies may only have apnea (failure to breathe) and can die from this. Children who have been vaccinated against pertussis as well as adults and teens often have milder symptoms that mimic bronchitis or asthma.

How is pertussis spread?

The pertussis bacteria are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs, or talks. Other people nearby can then inhale the bacteria. The first symptoms usually appear within 5 days to 21 days after a person is infected.

Is pertussis dangerous?

It can be, especially for babies. Pertussis can cause failure to breathe (apnea), pneumonia, and swelling of the brain (encephalopathy), which can lead to seizures and brain damage. Death from pertussis is rare, but more common with babies. Pertussis causes about 10 to 20 deaths each year in the United States.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

The doctor diagnoses patients with pertussis from their symptoms. To confirm the diagnosis, the doctor will swab the back of the nose for laboratory testing. It is important to remember laboratory test may be negative, even if a patient has pertussis.

How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat the infected person and their close contacts. In addition, it is helpful to get plenty of rest and

fluids. Persons hospitalized with severe pertussis may need special treatments to help them through prolonged periods of coughing.

Can pertussis be prevented?

Pertussis can be prevented among household members and others in close contact with an infected person by treating the exposed persons with antibiotics, even if they have been vaccinated.

Vaccination of children and adults can also prevent pertussis. The pertussis vaccine is given along with diphtheria and tetanus vaccines in the same shot (called DTaP) for children. DTaP cannot be given to babies less than six weeks old or to anyone seven years of age or older.

Experts recommend that all babies and children be given a full series of DTaP vaccine unless there is a medical reason not to receive the vaccine. Vaccination is recommended at 2, 4, 6, and 15 to 18 months old, with an additional shot at 4 to 6 years old, for a total of five doses. The 4th dose of DTaP may be given as early as 12 months, provided 6 months have elapsed since the 3rd dose of DTaP.

Vaccination against pertussis is also recommended for older children and adults. Because vaccine protection begins to fade in older children and adults, a new vaccine (called Tdap) has been developed against pertussis for these age groups. To protect babies from being exposed to pertussis, families who have or are expecting a baby and people who work with babies should consult with their doctor about receiving this vaccine.

Most hospitalizations and deaths occur in children younger than 3 months of age. When possible, babies should be kept away from people who are coughing. Babies with any coughing should be seen by a doctor.

Is the pertussis vaccine safe?

Yes, it is safe for most people. A vaccine, like any medicine, could possibly cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. However, the risk of a vaccine causing serious harm, or death, is extremely small. There is a slight risk of side effects caused by the vaccine.

Where can you get more information?

Call your doctor, nurse, local health department, or County of San Diego, Department of Health Services, Community Epidemiology (619) 515-6620.