



Alaska Division of Public Health

Prevention Promotion Protection

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a highly contagious bacterial infection, and one of the most common vaccine preventable diseases in the United States.

How does whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough is usually spread by coughing or sneezing. If untreated, an infected person can spread whooping cough for several weeks.

What are the symptoms?

The disease usually starts with mild cold symptoms or a cough, which can turn into severe coughing spells. The coughing spells can take place for 10 weeks or more.

- In infants, the cough may be mild or absent. However, infants may have a symptom known as “apnea,” which is a pause in breathing.
- Infants and children can cough violently and rapidly, until the air is gone from their lungs and they're forced to inhale with a loud "whooping" sound. This extreme coughing can result in vomiting and exhaustion. Illness is generally less severe in adolescents and adults.

Babies and whooping cough

Babies are especially vulnerable to whooping cough. They often catch the illness from older siblings, parents, or other caregivers. **Pregnant women should receive the whooping vaccine in the third trimester of every pregnancy to protect their babies.**

- More than half of infants less than 1 year of age who get the disease must be hospitalized.
- About 1 in 5 infants with whooping cough get pneumonia (lung infection).
- About 1 in 100 infants will have convulsions.
- About 1 in 100 infants who are hospitalized will die from whooping cough.

How can I prevent whooping cough?

DTaP vaccine

Infants and children under 7 should receive the DTaP vaccine. To maximize protection, all 5 doses of DTaP are needed on time according to the recommended immunization schedule.

Tdap vaccine

Adolescents and adults need the Tdap vaccine. The protection received from DTaP, the childhood vaccine, fades over time. Adolescents and should get Tdap even if they were completely vaccinated as children. The Tdap vaccine is especially important for pregnant women, family members with and caregivers of new infants.

Where can I get more information about whooping cough?

- State of Alaska Section of Epidemiology Pertussis Information available at: <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/id/Pages/dod/pertussis/pertussis.aspx>
- Pertussis (Whooping Cough) - What You Need to Know (CDC) available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/Pertussis/>