



## **Frequently Asked Questions About Whooping Cough (Pertussis)**

### **What is whooping cough (also known as pertussis)?**

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a highly contagious bacterial infection. Whooping cough spreads easily by coughing and sneezing and mainly affects the respiratory system (the organs that help you breathe).

### **How serious is whooping cough?**

Whooping cough is very serious, especially for babies and young kids. Whooping cough can cause pneumonia, seizures, brain damage, and death. Babies younger than one year of age who get whooping cough may be hospitalized or even die.

### **What are the symptoms of whooping cough?**

The symptoms differ depending on your age. Babies and young kids can have severe coughing spells that make it hard to eat, drink, breathe, or sleep. Some babies may turn blue because they can't catch their breath. Older kids and adults may only have runny nose and low fever followed by a persistent cough that can last for several weeks and is often worse at night. It is important to know that not everyone with whooping cough makes the "whoop" sound when trying to breathe in after a coughing spell.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms usually start 5 to 21 days after exposure to whooping cough (average is 7 to 10 days after exposure).

### **How is whooping cough treated?**

Whooping cough is generally treated with antibiotics. It's important to start treatment as soon as possible to help keep from spreading the disease to others. Early treatment can also make the symptoms end sooner and be less severe.

### **How is whooping cough prevented?**

Getting vaccinated is the best way to lower the risk of getting whooping cough. It's important to wash your hands, cover your cough, and stay home whenever you're sick

### **Are some people at higher risk from whooping cough?**

People at greatest risk from whooping cough include:

- Infants under one year old.
- Pregnant women (especially in the third trimester).
- People that have a chronic respiratory illness.

## **Can I spread whooping cough even if I don't have a bad cough?**

Yes. You can have whooping cough without realizing it and infect others. It's especially important for people who are going to be around babies or pregnant women to know. They should make sure they are vaccinated and stay away from high risk people when they have a runny nose or cough.

## **How common is whooping cough in Alaska?**

Whooping cough is always active in our state. See Alaska case counts for current numbers: <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/id/Pages/dod/pertussis/cases.aspx>

## **Are there more cases of whooping cough than what's reported?**

There are always more cases of whooping cough than what's reported. Only about one out of every 10 cases gets reported to public health because:

- Sometimes whooping cough is diagnosed as something else.
- Some people have whooping cough without knowing it, so they may not see a doctor and it could go undiagnosed and unreported.

## **What if I was exposed to someone who has whooping cough?**

Talk to your doctor, nurse, or clinic as soon as you learn that you have been exposed. You may be given antibiotics that can stop you from getting the disease. Try to stay away from other people until you have completed the first 5 days of treatment (or until another diagnosis for the cough is given and you know that you are not contagious).

## **What should I do if I think someone in my family has whooping cough?**

If you think you or one of your family members has whooping cough, call your doctor, nurse, or clinic and ask to be evaluated for whooping cough. Anyone that might have whooping cough should stay away from other people until the illness is treated (or another diagnosis for the cough proves it's not contagious).

## **How should employers handle employees returning to work who have had whooping cough?**

Employers should talk with their Human Resources Office to understand their company policies, procedures, and labor agreements, and work with their local health jurisdiction if they have questions about when a person with whooping cough can safely return to work. Employers should not share individual employee health information with others.

## **What's the best cleaning method to prevent spreading whooping cough?**

While pertussis bacteria can live on a surface or object for several days, most people don't get whooping cough from contact with surfaces or objects. They get it from close face to face contact with people who have whooping cough.

## **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>
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

# About Whooping Cough Vaccines

## What is the whooping cough vaccine?

There are two vaccines for whooping cough:

- DTaP is for babies and children younger than age seven.
- Tdap is recommended for kids 7 and older, adolescents, and adults (including pregnant women).
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## Who needs the whooping cough vaccine?

People of all ages should get a whooping cough vaccine. If you aren't vaccinated, you aren't protected. If you aren't protected, you may put vulnerable infants and pregnant women at risk.

Who	Which vaccine
<b>Adults 19 years and older</b> (who did not already get a Tdap booster)  Especially:  Health care workers  Anyone who is in contact with babies less than a year old	Tdap; one dose
<b>Pregnant women</b> (even if you were previously vaccinated)	Tdap; one dose during the 3 <sup>rd</sup> trimester (27 - 36 weeks gestation) of each pregnancy
<b>Teens 11 to 18 years old</b> (preferably at 11 or 12 years of age)	Tdap; one dose
<b>Kids 7 to 10 years old</b> (who did not get all 5 doses of DTaP listed below)	Tdap; one dose
<b>Children 2 months to 7 years old</b>	DTaP  One dose at each age:  2 months 4 months 6 months 15-18 months 4-6 years

## **How soon can my new baby get the vaccine?**

The first dose of DTaP vaccine is usually given at two months, but it can be given as early as six weeks if your health care provider thinks your baby is at increased risk of getting whooping cough. Check with your provider if you are concerned about the risk to your baby.

## **What happens if children and teens haven't gotten all of their scheduled whooping cough vaccines?**

Not getting recommended vaccines on time puts children and teens at higher risk for getting and spreading whooping cough. Vaccination is the best protection we have against whooping cough, so it's important that **everyone**—children and adults—get their scheduled whooping cough vaccines. If your child hasn't followed the recommended immunization schedule, and is seven to ten years old, he or she needs a Tdap vaccine.

If your child is younger than seven and isn't up-to-date, talk to his or her health care provider right away about getting caught up on DTaP vaccines.

## **How often should adults get the whooping cough vaccine?**

All adults should get one dose of the Tdap vaccine. Pregnant women need the Tdap vaccine with each pregnancy. If you had the Tdap vaccine as a teenager (age 11 or older), you don't need another one unless you're pregnant, in which case, you should get the Tdap vaccine again when you are 27 to 36 weeks pregnant. Check with your doctor, nurse, or clinic to make sure you're up to date with your immunizations.

## **If my child had whooping cough, should he or she still get vaccinated?**

Yes, When someone gets whooping cough, their body develops a natural immunity. However, it's unknown how long that immunity lasts for each person, so routine vaccination against whooping cough is still recommended for younger kids.

## **Why should I get vaccinated if I don't have close contact with babies?**

While you may not have direct contact with babies, you may be around them in public places such as the grocery store or the library. Babies often catch whooping cough from an adult or family member who may not even know they have whooping cough. Babies who get whooping cough often have to be hospitalized and could die.

## **How many people need to be immunized to reach community (or herd) immunity?**

Typically, more than 90 percent of a population must be vaccinated against a disease to produce general protection for the population. Since whooping cough vaccines don't last a lifetime, it's hard to judge the percentage of people who would need to be immunized to reach community immunity.

## **Does the whooping cough vaccine really work?**

The whooping cough vaccine is the best available protection against the disease. It helps protect both the person who gets the vaccine and those around them who are most vulnerable to severe whooping cough or complications (like babies and pregnant women). We know that the protection received from any of the available whooping cough vaccines is fairly good (73 to 98 percent effective) in the first year after receiving the vaccine, but it does wear off over time. In the same way, people that had whooping cough in that past gradually become susceptible to the disease again when about 5 – 10 years have passed.

## **Can people who have been vaccinated still get whooping cough?**

Sometimes when vaccinated people are exposed, they get whooping cough anyway, although they usually have milder symptoms, a shorter illness, and may be less likely to spread the disease to others.

## **How long does the vaccine for younger kids (DTaP) last?**

Recent studies show that the vaccine for young kids (DTaP) doesn't last as long as expected, and protection wears off over time. Protection is high—about 98 percent—within the first year after getting the fifth DTaP dose. It goes down to about 70 percent by five years later, and may continue to gradually go down after that.

In the 1990s, the United States switched from DTP vaccine to a new whooping cough vaccine for kids. The new vaccine (DTaP) causes fewer side effects than the old vaccine (DTP) but protection from the new vaccine doesn't last as long. This may explain why there are more whooping cough cases in older children. Teens today are the first group of kids to get only the newer DTaP vaccine as babies; they didn't get any doses of the old vaccine.

## **How long does the vaccine for older kids, teens, and adults (Tdap) last?**

A study done here in Washington State during the 2012 pertussis epidemic showed that overall, the Tdap vaccine is 64% effective in protecting against pertussis disease, and within the first year after vaccination it is 73% effective. There are more reported whooping cough cases among teens—a changing trend across the country that indicates that the duration of protection against whooping cough for Tdap vaccine is shorter than expected. By 4 years after vaccination, protection may drop below 50% effectiveness. This shows why it is so important for pregnant women to be vaccinated toward the end of every pregnancy.

## **If the vaccine doesn't last very long, why should I get it?**

The vaccine works very well for the first couple of years. Even after five years, children still have moderate protection from whooping cough. Infants usually get whooping cough from a family member or caregiver and are at greatest risk for getting very sick and potentially dying from whooping cough. People who are vaccinated and still get whooping cough usually have milder, shorter illnesses, and are less likely to spread the disease to others, like babies and pregnant women.

## **Should I get vaccinated again if I got a Tdap vaccine a few years ago?**

The current recommendation is that everyone 11 years and older should get a one-time dose of Tdap vaccine. Pregnant women should get the Tdap vaccine at each pregnancy.

## **Will vaccination recommendations change?**

Recommendations for pregnant women have changed, and it's possible that other recommendations will change. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention develop and adjust recommendations based on what they learn by monitoring disease reports and doing studies.

## **What is the best prevention for people who are up-to-date on their whooping cough vaccine?**

Until there are new recommendations for the Tdap vaccine, or a new vaccine, everyone should wash their hands, cover their cough, and stay home when they're sick. It's best to avoid close contact with anyone who has cough or cold symptoms.

*Updated March 2016*