

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a serious infection of the lungs and upper airway that is caused by a bacteria. The pertussis bacteria can be present in the nose and throat of people of all ages. It is spread easily by coughing, sneezing and close contact.

What are the Symptoms of Pertussis?

Pertussis starts with cold like symptoms including a runny nose, low fever, coughing and sneezing. Within 1-2 weeks the cough becomes severe and occurs in coughing spells. Often it ends with a whooping sound and it can sometimes cause the person to gag or vomit due to the thick mucus being produced. It can be difficult to breathe. The cough lasts several weeks and is often worse at night.

How Common is Pertussis?

Outbreaks of pertussis occur every 3-4 years. In the past few years, pertussis illness has affected increasing numbers of infants in North America. Several infants have died from this illness while others have been hospitalized and have been very ill.

Why is Pertussis on the Rise?

Even though many people have been immunized against pertussis as children, their immunity to pertussis becomes reduced in adulthood and they are more likely to develop the infection and transmit it to others. Anyone who has had pertussis illness does not develop lifelong immunity, so they can get the disease again.

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Why is Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Dangerous to Your Baby?

Pertussis disease is life threatening in babies and young children. Newborns are too young to receive the vaccine and they do not get adequate protection until they have received four doses of vaccine by 18 months of age. Young children, especially infants can become extremely ill and develop serious complications like pneumonia, convulsions, difficulty breathing and permanent brain damage. Infants can die from pertussis even if they are treated with antibiotics or cared for in hospital.

How Can You Protect Your Newborn Baby From Pertussis?

The best way to protect your newborn baby from pertussis is for those who care for the baby to be immunized. To protect your newborn, all those who will be in close contact with your baby should be immunized before your baby is born. Encourage your baby's father, siblings, grandparents and any other close caregivers to be immunized. They should make appointments at the Public Health Nursing office in your community to receive the vaccine.

You will be offered the pertussis vaccine once your baby is born at the hospital. The vaccine is safe for breastfeeding mothers. Your baby will be less likely to become ill from pertussis if those around him/her are protected.

When will your baby be immunized against pertussis?

Your baby will be immunized against pertussis at the 2, 4, and 6 month visits to Public Health Clinics, and will receive a booster at 18 months. At that time, your baby will have received the best protection possible against pertussis illness.