

Preventing Pertussis (Whooping Cough)



What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a disease that is also called “whooping cough.” Pertussis is caused by bacteria. You or your child can get pertussis by breathing in these bacteria from an infected person who coughs or sneezes near you. Lately, there have been a lot more people in the United States getting pertussis. Pertussis can be a bad cough in adults, but it is a very dangerous infection in babies and small children.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis normally starts with symptoms of a cold like a stuffy and runny nose. You might also have a mild fever or cough. Your cough will get much worse after 1 or 2 weeks. Many children have hard and fast coughing that causes a whooping sound. They may gag on mucus and throw up after they cough. Not every child who has pertussis will make the whooping sound when they cough.

Why is pertussis dangerous?

Pertussis is very serious for babies because they are not always able to fight this infection. Many babies less than 1 year old will need to be put in the hospital when they get pertussis because they will have problems breathing and pneumonia (an infection in the lungs). Some babies who are less than 3 months old will die from pertussis if they get infected. Most adults do not have severe symptoms of the disease and do not realize their cold is pertussis. Adults can easily pass this infection to a child without knowing it.

What is the treatment for pertussis?

If you or your child has pertussis, you will be given antibiotics. This helps kill the bacteria so you will not be able to pass the disease to another person any more. But the antibiotics may not stop your symptoms and cough. You may have coughing fits for up to 10 weeks. You can take over-the-counter medicines to help with your symptoms.

Don't normal vaccine shots keep my child from getting pertussis?

If your child gets the normal vaccine shots, the shot for pertussis will be given at 2, 4, 6, and 15 to 18 months, then again before starting school at 4 to 6 years old. Newborn babies do not get full protection from the disease until they are 1 year old and have had the first 3 shots. Most severe cases of pertussis happen in babies less than 1 year old.

How can I protect myself and my child from pertussis?

Most babies and children get pertussis from an adult who they are around often, such as a parent or grandparent. Many adults who got the pertussis vaccine as a child have lost protection against pertussis and are able to get the infection again. All teenagers and adults, especially those who are often around babies, should receive a pertussis booster shot called Tdap. This is a form of the tetanus vaccine that also has the pertussis vaccine in the same shot. It does not matter when your last tetanus shot was. You can safely get and should get the Tdap shot especially if you live with or are often around babies or young children. If all the adults and teenagers around your baby get the Tdap booster, the chance that your baby will get pertussis becomes very small.

What if I'm pregnant?

The very best way to protect your baby is to have the Tdap vaccine each time you are pregnant. The best time for the vaccine is between 27 and 36 weeks of pregnancy. This allows your body to produce antibodies to prevent pertussis. The antibodies are passed to your baby through the placenta and your breast milk. Your baby can get protection from pertussis for the first 6 months of life if you get the vaccine while you are pregnant. The Tdap vaccine is very safe in pregnancy. There is no risk to your baby by getting the Tdap vaccine while you are pregnant. If you do not have the chance to get the Tdap vaccine while you are pregnant, you can get the shot right after you have the baby. This will still prevent you from passing the infection to your baby. If you are breastfeeding and get the shot, your baby can also get protection from pertussis from your breast milk.

What are the side effects of getting the Tdap vaccine?

The most common side effects of the Tdap vaccine are pain and redness where you get the shot. You might also have a headache, feel very tired, or have an upset stomach. You should not get the Tdap vaccine if you are sick with an infection or have previously had a reaction to the vaccine.

For More Information

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Pertussis—What you need to know

<http://www.cdc.gov/features/pertussis/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Preventing Pertussis

<http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/about/prevention.html>

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