



Pertussis (Whooping Cough) FAQ

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a respiratory disease caused by bacteria. It often causes serious problems in babies but is usually milder in older children and adults.

Who can get pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age, but infants and young children are at the highest risk of life-threatening consequences. In Oregon, many pertussis cases occur in newborns that are too young to be immunized.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

- The first symptoms are typically runny nose, sneezing, mild fever and cough. Symptoms usually appear 5 to 21 days after a person is infected.
- After one or two weeks, the cough gets worse and usually starts to occur in strong fits of coughing. This may last six weeks or longer.
- In children, coughing fits are often followed by a [“whooping” sound](#) as they try to catch their breath.
- After coughing, infected people may have difficulty catching their breath, vomit or become blue in the face from lack of air. The coughing spells may be so severe that it is hard for babies to eat, drink or breathe.

If you test positive for pertussis but have mild or no symptoms, can you transmit it?

Yes. Although the disease may be milder in older people, any infected person can transmit the disease to others, including unimmunized or incompletely immunized infants.

How is pertussis spread?

- Bacteria live in the nose, mouth and throat, and droplets are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks.
- Touching a tissue or sharing a cup can also spread the disease.
- Older adolescents, adults and parents who may have a mild illness can spread the disease to infants and young children in the household.

How long is someone infectious?

- Pertussis is highly contagious.
- Persons with pertussis are most infectious 1 week before cough onset and the first 2 weeks after cough onset. Total 21 days.
- Example: cough starts 03/08. People are considered infectious 03/01-03/22. All people exposed during this time will need to be contacted.

What complications can arise from a pertussis infection?

- High risk persons such as pregnant women, infants, young children, elderly and immunocompromised persons infected with pertussis may require hospitalization.
- Respiratory complications can include:

- Pneumonia-secondary bacterial infection
- Bronchiolitis-inflammation of the small airways in the lungs
- Apnea-temporary cessation of breathing, especially in infants
- Pneumothorax-collapsed lung
- Neurological complications can include:
 - Encephalopathy-inflammation of the brain
 - Subdural hematoma-blood clot in the brain
 - Convulsion-seizures occur due to lack of oxygen during coughing fits
- Other complications
 - Rib fractures
 - Dehydration
 - Ear infections
 - Hernia

Is pertussis dangerous?

- Pertussis can be very dangerous for infants who have the highest risk of pertussis related complications and death.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

- A doctor may diagnosis pertussis based on symptoms and laboratory tests.
 - Nasopharyngeal swab will take approximately 2-3 days to return.
- If you have symptoms and/or have been exposed to a confirmed case, please call your provider **before** going into the clinic. Wear a mask before entering.
 - Yellowhawk eligible persons can get tested by calling their PCP team.
 - Non-Yellowhawk eligible persons can get tested by calling their PCP or going to Urgent Care.

How do you treat it?

- Pertussis is a bacterial infection and treated with antibiotics.

How do you prevent pertussis?

Immunization is the best way to prevent pertussis. Children need a series of five DTaP vaccinations starting at 2 months of age until kindergarten. Immunity wears off, so adolescents and adults need a Tdap booster shot. The booster helps protect adolescents and adults from getting pertussis and spreading it to vulnerable infants. Pertussis vaccines are required for school and childcare attendance in Oregon. Pregnant women should ask their healthcare provider about getting a Tdap booster in their third trimester of each pregnancy to protect their babies.

- Cover your cough
- Wash your hands.
- Keep babies away from anyone who is coughing!

Where can I get the pertussis vaccination?

- Yellowhawk eligible persons can use our walk in immunization clinic, Monday through Friday, 8 am to 4 pm for all ages. If they would like a scheduled appointment, they can call 541.240.8697 to be placed on the schedule.
- Non-Yellowhawk eligible persons have multiple options
 - Contact your PCP or Pediatrician
 - Walmart pharmacy

- Urgent Care
- Umatilla County Health Department

Is the pertussis vaccine safe?

Yes, the vaccine is safe though there is a slight risk of pain and swelling at the injection site or fever. The risk of the disease is much more serious.

What happens if I am diagnosed with pertussis?

- If you test positive for pertussis you will need to isolate.
- You will be contacted by either Yellowhawk Public Health or Umatilla County Health to do a case investigation.
- You will be prescribed antibiotic therapy.

What happens when Public Health contacts me for a case investigation?

- Answer the call and work with the case investigator
- You will be given information on how to isolate safely to prevent transmitting pertussis to others.
- Isolation is typically until you have completed the course of antibiotics, 5 days.
- Case investigators do not share your information.
- The interview usually takes 30 minutes.

I was exposed to a confirmed case of pertussis, now what?

- Exposure is at 6 feet for more than 1 hour or in school settings 3 feet for more than 1 hour.
- Talk to your provider, nurse, or clinic on the phone as soon as you learn that you have been exposed. You may be given antibiotics to treat your infection and make the infection less serious, especially if you start it early. Try to stay away from other people until you have completed the first 5 days of treatment, or until you receive a different diagnosis and know you aren't contagious.

What's the best cleaning method to prevent spreading of pertussis?

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 are ill with pertussis.

How should employers handle employees returning to work who have had pertussis?

Employers should talk with their Human Resources office to understand their company policies, procedures and work with their local health agency if they have questions about when a person with pertussis can safely return to work. Employers should not share individual employee health information with others.

Where can I get more information?

- Ask your healthcare provider, contact your local health department or visit the Oregon Immunization Program's website at www.healthoregon.org/imm. To find out where to get a pertussis vaccination, call SafeNet at 211.
- Contact Yellowhawk's Public Health team at 541.240.8697.