

Whooping Cough: What it is and how it's treated

Information for patients

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough, also called pertussis, is a respiratory tract infection that usually starts like a cold and then turns into a bad cough over time. The cough comes in bursts and can make you cough for several minutes at a time. After you cough, you might make a "whooping" sound when you catch your breath. Very young children are more likely to make the whooping sound than older children and adults. You might vomit after coughing, or stop breathing for a few seconds, and your face might turn blue or red from the effort. You might cough more at night.

What causes it?

Bacteria (germs) cause whooping cough. Whooping cough is highly contagious, which means other people can easily catch it from you.

Whooping cough bacteria are released into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. You can get whooping cough if you breathe in these bacteria. You can also get it if you touch a surface (such as someone's hand) that is coated with the bacteria.

You should see your doctor if you think you have whooping cough or if you have been around someone who might have it.

How can my doctor tell if I have it?

Whooping cough usually starts like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing and maybe a mild cough or fever. But after 1-2 weeks, you can have severe attacks of coughing that can be a problem for another 1-6 weeks. Your doctor may ask you what your cough sounds like and what happens after you cough. Your doctor may want to listen to your cough.

You may need special tests to tell for sure if you have whooping cough. In one test, your doctor will swab the inside of your nose or your throat and the swab is then sent to a laboratory. Your doctor may also want to take a chest x-ray or a blood sample.

What should I do if I have whooping cough?

Your doctor will most likely prescribe antibiotics to make the cough go away faster, and to help stop the disease from spreading to other people. Because whooping cough is so contagious, your doctor may also prescribe antibiotics for your whole family so that it doesn't spread further.

People with whooping cough can spread the infection to others, especially infants and children. They should stay at home and avoid contact with other people. Babies younger than one year who have whooping cough may need to stay in the hospital because whooping cough can lead to pneumonia and other problems.

You may cough on and off for up to six weeks, even with medication, and you may need to miss time at work or school. Your doctor can tell you when it's okay to go back to work or school.

Unfortunately, over-the-counter medications for coughing will not help with whooping cough. You should try to get plenty of rest, and drink plenty of fluids like water or soups so that you don't get dehydrated. You can try using a humidifier or having a warm bath or shower to help clear the lungs and make breathing easier. Also stay away from tobacco smoke, lit fire places, or other areas where the air may not be clean.

What can I do to prevent whooping cough?

Vaccination against whooping cough is part of the normal early childhood shots and boosters that children get before grade school. Children aren't adequately protected until they've had at least three shots, which is why very young children are more at-risk. A total of five shots is recommended for children by age 6. Protection from the childhood whooping cough vaccines begins to wear off 5-10 years after vaccination.

Health experts, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Family Physicians, recommend that most teens and adults get the Tdap booster vaccination for continued protection against whooping cough if they have not been vaccinated or if their shots are not up to date. Ask your doctor to make sure your vaccinations are up to date.



Funding and support for this material have been provided by GlaxoSmithKline.