

Frequently Asked Questions – Pertussis (Whooping Cough) in the School Setting

General information

What is pertussis?

Who can get pertussis?

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

How soon do symptoms of pertussis appear?

How is pertussis spread?

When and for how long can a person spread pertussis?

Testing and Treatment

Is there a lab test for pertussis?

Why did my healthcare provider tell me to stay home for 5 days?

What will happen if I do not want to take the antibiotics?

How is pertussis prevented?

Vaccine

Who needs the pertussis vaccine?

If I got vaccinated, can I still get pertussis?

Schools

If a case of pertussis is confirmed in my child's school, what steps will the school take?

If my child is not vaccinated will he/she have to be excluded from school?

When should a student be excluded from school for pertussis?

Who is defined as a close contact to receive preventative antibiotics?

If a student tests positive, will all the students in the classroom/school be recommended to take a antibiotics?

Are there special cleaning requirements for pertussis?

What are the most important ways to prevent pertussis?

Contact information

Where can I get more information?

General Information

What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a highly contagious illness caused by bacteria. It mainly affects the respiratory system (the organs that help you breathe).

Who can get pertussis?

People of all ages can get pertussis, even people who have been vaccinated or have had pertussis infection in the past. Illness may be milder in previously vaccinated persons. Infants are at greatest risk for getting pertussis and then having severe complications from it, including pneumonia and death.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

- The first signs of pertussis are similar to a cold (sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever, and cough). After one or two weeks, the cough gets worse.
- The cough occurs in sudden, uncontrollable bursts where one cough follows the next without a break for breath
- Many children will make a high-pitched whooping sound when breathing in after a coughing episode. Whooping is less common in infants and adults.
- After a coughing spell, the person may throw up.
- Between coughing spells, the person seems well, but the illness is exhausting over time.
- Over time, coughing spells become less frequent, but may continue for several weeks or months.

How soon do symptoms of pertussis appear?

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

How is pertussis spread?

A person can be infected with pertussis from breathing in the bacteria. This germ comes out of the mouth and nose when someone who has pertussis coughs or sneezes.

When and for how long can a person spread pertussis?

Pertussis is most likely to spread to others early in the illness. Persons with pertussis can no longer spread the disease once they have completed 5 days of treatment with antibiotics. However, persons with pertussis who do not take antibiotics can spread the disease during the first 21 days of illness.

Testing and Treatment

Is there a lab test for pertussis?

Yes. Healthcare providers can test for pertussis by inserting a swab (like a long q-tip) into the patient's nose. The lab will test the material on the swab to see if they can find the bacteria that causes pertussis.

Why did my healthcare provider tell me to stay home for 5 days?

An infected person can spread pertussis to others until they have completed 5 days of antibiotics or their cough has lasted longer than 21 days.

What will happen if I do not want to take the antibiotics?

Individuals with pertussis will need to stay away from others for 21 days after cough onset. This includes staying home from daycare, school or work.

How is pertussis prevented?

Vaccination is the best way to prevent pertussis. Using good health habits also helps slow the spread of pertussis — wash your hands, cover your cough, and stay home when you are sick.

Vaccine

Who needs the pertussis vaccine?

Protection from pertussis is important for people of all ages. Two vaccines are available to provide protection from pertussis - **DTaP & Tdap**.

Children two months through six years of age should receive five doses of the vaccine called **DTaP**. This vaccine is routinely given at ages 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 15 to 18 months, and a booster dose between 4 to 6 years of age.

For adolescents and adults, a single dose of the **Tdap** vaccine is recommended:

- As part of the routine adolescent visit, adolescents, ages 11 to 12 years, should receive a one-time dose of Tdap vaccine.
- Adolescents, ages 13 through 18 years old, if not previously vaccinated with a dose of Tdap, should receive a single one-time dose.
- Adults 19 years and older, if not previously vaccinated with a dose of Tdap, should receive a single one-time dose.
- Tdap should be administered regardless of interval since the last tetanus or diphtheria toxoid-containing vaccine.
- Tdap may be given in place of one routine 10-year Td booster.

Children 7 through 10 years of age who are not fully vaccinated against pertussis should receive their single dose of Tdap during these years, rather than waiting until age 11. (Fully vaccinated is defined as five doses of DTaP following the recommended ACIP minimum ages and intervals; or four doses of DTaP if the fourth dose was administered on or after the fourth birthday.)

Infants younger than 12 months of age are more likely to suffer from pertussis complications and pertussis-related deaths than older age groups. To protect these infants, certain adults should get a dose of Tdap immediately:

- Parents, siblings, grandparents, child-care providers, healthcare personnel and teachers who have not previously received a dose of Tdap and have, or anticipate having, close contact with an infant younger than 12 months, and
- Pregnant women who have not previously received Tdap. Vaccinate during the third or late second trimester (after the 20th week of pregnancy), or immediately after giving birth.

If I was vaccinated, can I still get pertussis?

It is possible. No vaccine is 100% effective, and pertussis vaccine is no exception. However, most children (about 85 children out of 100) who get all doses of the DTaP vaccine will be protected from pertussis. Vaccinated children and adults can become infected with and transmit pertussis; however, disease is less likely to be severe.

Additionally, protection from the childhood vaccine decreases over time. Preteens, teens and adults need to be revaccinated with Tdap, even if they were completely vaccinated as children.

It is important to remember that children who never received any doses of the DTaP vaccine face odds of having pertussis at least eight times higher than children who received all five doses of the vaccine.

Vaccines are the best way to prevent pertussis. In addition, people who do catch pertussis after being vaccinated are much less likely to be hospitalized or die from the disease.

Schools

If a case of pertussis is confirmed in my child's school, what steps will the school take?

- The school may decide to send a letter home with students to inform parents, guardians and staff of pertussis in the school or classroom.
- The school nurse will be on the lookout for severe or prolonged cough illness in students and staff.
- Maine CDC will work with the school to control the spread of pertussis.

- Maine CDC will identify close or high-risk contacts of persons with pertussis and will recommend that those contacts receive preventative antibiotics.
- Vaccination will be encouraged for all those who may not be up to date on the pertussis vaccine.

If my child is not vaccinated will he/she have to be excluded from school?

No, a child will not be excluded based on his/her vaccination status

When should a student be excluded from school for pertussis?

- Student has lab-confirmed pertussis infection – exclude until he/she has completed 5 days of appropriate antibiotics.
- Student has provider diagnosed pertussis (no lab test was ordered) and is being treated with antibiotics - exclude until he/she has completed 5 days of appropriate antibiotics.
- Student is suspected of having pertussis, has been evaluated by a provider, and lab results are pending – exclude until either: 1) test result is negative or 2) test result is positive and he/she has completed 5 days of appropriate antibiotics

Who is defined as a close contact to receive preventative antibiotics?

Maine CDC investigates all reported cases of pertussis. Typically, household members, high-risk contacts such as pregnant women and infants, and very close friends who have spent overnights with a confirmed case may be recommended to receive a antibiotics to prevent pertussis.

If a student tests positive, will all the students in the classroom/ school be recommended to take a antibiotics?

No, not necessarily. Maine CDC investigates every case and works with the school nurse and administration to make specific recommendations. Parents will be contacted if a recommendation is made for their child to take a preventative antibiotics.

Are there special cleaning requirements for pertussis?

No. Pertussis usually spreads by breathing in the pertussis bacteria. Most people do not get pertussis by contact with a contaminated surface or object. Routine cleaning and disinfecting will remove these bacteria.

What are the most important ways for me to prevent pertussis?

The best protection is getting vaccinated. Try to stay away from people who are coughing and sneezing. If you are sick, try to stay away from people until your illness is treated; cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze; and wash your hands often.

Contact information

Where can I get more information?

For more information, contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact:

- Maine Immunization Program by calling (207) 287-3746 [TTY Line (888) 706-3876] or visiting the website <http://www.immunizeme.org>.
- Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov>.