

Whooping cough (pertussis) is an infection of the [respiratory system](#) caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis* (or *B. pertussis*). It mainly affects babies younger than 6 months old who aren't yet protected by immunizations, and kids 11 to 18 years old whose immunity has started to fade.

Whooping cough causes severe [coughing](#) spells, which can sometimes end in a "whooping" sound when the child breathes in.

Signs & Symptoms

The first symptoms of whooping cough are similar to those of a common cold:

- runny nose
- sneezing
- mild cough
- low-grade fever

After about 1 to 2 weeks, the dry, irritating cough evolves into coughing spells. During a coughing spell, which can last for more than a minute, a child may turn red or purple. At the end of a spell, the child may make the characteristic whooping sound when breathing in or may vomit. Between spells, the child usually feels well.

While many infants and younger kids with whooping cough develop the coughing fits and accompanying whoop, not all do. And sometimes babies don't cough or whoop as older kids do. Infants may look as if they're gasping for air with a reddened face and may actually stop breathing (this is called apnea) for a few seconds during very bad spells.

Adults and teens may have milder or different symptoms, such as a prolonged cough (rather than coughing spells) or coughing without the whoop.

Contagiousness

Pertussis is highly contagious. The bacteria spread from person to person through tiny drops of fluid from an infected person's nose or mouth. These may become airborne when the person sneezes, coughs, or laughs. Others then can become infected by inhaling the drops or getting the drops on their hands and then touching their mouths or noses.

Infected people are most contagious during the earliest stages of the illness for up to about 2 weeks after the cough begins. Antibiotics shorten the period of contagiousness to 5 days following the start of antibiotic treatment.

Prevention

Whooping cough can be prevented with the pertussis [vaccine](#), which is part of the [DTP \(diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis\) immunization](#).

Incubation

The incubation period (the time between infection and the start of symptoms) for whooping cough is usually 7 to 10 days, but can be as long as 21 days.

Duration

Pertussis usually causes prolonged symptoms — 1 to 2 weeks of common cold symptoms, followed by up to 3 months of severe coughing.

The last stage consists of another few weeks of recovery with gradual clearing of symptoms. In some children, the recovery period can last for months.

Treatment

Call the doctor if you suspect that your child has whooping cough. To make a diagnosis, the doctor will take a medical history, do a thorough physical exam, and may take nose and throat mucus samples to be checked in a lab. [Blood tests](#) and a chest X-ray also might be done.

Whooping cough is treated with antibiotics. Many experts believe that antibiotics are most effective in shortening the length of the infection when they're given in the first stage of the illness, **before** coughing spells begin. But even if antibiotics are started later, they're still important because they can stop the spread of the pertussis infection to others. Ask your doctor whether preventive antibiotics or vaccine boosters for other family members are needed.

Some kids with whooping cough need to be treated in a hospital. Babies and younger children are more likely to be hospitalized because they're at greater risk for problems like [pneumonia](#). Whooping cough can be life-threatening for infants younger than 6 months, so they almost always need hospital treatment.

Other potential complications include difficulty breathing, periods of apnea, needing oxygen (particularly during a coughing spell), and [dehydration](#).

While in the hospital, a child may need suctioning to clear the airways. Breathing will be watched closely, and oxygen given if needed. Intravenous (IV) fluids might be needed if a child shows signs of dehydration or has difficulty eating. Precautions will be taken to prevent the infection from spreading to other patients, hospital staff, and visitors.

Home Care

If your child is being treated for pertussis at home, follow the schedule for giving antibiotics exactly as your doctor prescribed. Giving cough medicine probably will not help, as even the strongest usually can't relieve the coughing spells of whooping cough. The cough is actually the body's way of trying to clear the airways.

During recovery, let your child rest in bed and use a cool-mist vaporizer to help soothe irritated lungs and breathing passages. (Be sure to follow directions for keeping it clean and

mold-free.) And keep your home free of irritants that can trigger coughing spells, such as aerosol sprays; tobacco smoke; and smoke from cooking, fireplaces, and wood-burning stoves.

Kids with whooping cough may vomit or not eat or drink much because of the coughing. So offer smaller, more frequent meals and encourage your child to drink lots of fluids. Watch for signs of dehydration, including thirst, irritability, restlessness, lethargy, sunken eyes, a dry mouth and tongue, dry skin, crying without tears, and fewer trips to the bathroom to pee (or in infants, fewer wet diapers).

When to Call the Doctor

Call the doctor if you think that your child has whooping cough or has been exposed to someone with whooping cough, even if your child has already had all scheduled pertussis immunizations.

This is especially important if your child has long coughing spells and:

- the coughing make your child's skin or lips turn red, purple, or blue
- your child vomits after coughing
- there's a whooping sound after the cough
- your child has trouble breathing or seems to have brief periods of not breathing (apnea)
- your child seems very sluggish

If your child has been diagnosed with whooping cough and is being treated at home, get immediate medical care if he or she develops difficulty breathing or shows signs of dehydration.