

Diseases Fact Sheet - Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

For Questions, please call: 605-773-3737
(1-800-592-1861 in South Dakota only)

This material is provided for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical care. Please call or visit your health care provider concerning personal medical questions, such as appropriate care, treatment or other medical advice.

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis (also called Whooping Cough) is a very contagious respiratory illness caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*, which infect the nose, throat, and mouth.

What are the symptoms of Pertussis?

In the early stages, Pertussis may be mistaken for the common cold. Early symptoms may include runny nose, low-grade fever (if present), sneezing, and a mild cough. About 2 weeks after these mild symptoms begin, the cough worsens and coughing comes in fits. Some people will vomit after these coughing fits. Often, at the end of a coughing fit, there will be a high-pitched sound like a “whoop” on the inhale. This gives the disease its nickname, Whooping Cough. Some people will also have a thick mucus discharge from the nose and throat. These coughing episodes may be ongoing for one to two months and be more frequent at night, which can disrupt sleep. Symptoms gradually resolve over time. Adults and partially immunized children generally have milder symptoms than unvaccinated children do.

How does Pertussis spread?

Pertussis spreads person to person through infectious respiratory particles, like the ones expelled when a person coughs, sneezes, speaks, or sings. Transmission is quite efficient within households.

What is the incubation period for Pertussis?

The time from when a person is exposed until they begin to show symptoms is usually 7-10 days, but the full range is 4 to 21 days.

How long are people contagious with Pertussis?

A person who has Pertussis is contagious from symptom onset until 21 days after symptom onset. If appropriate antibiotics are started, the period of communicability ends when they have completed their 5-day course of antibiotic.

What should I do if I think I have Pertussis?

See your healthcare provider for evaluation. To test for Pertussis, the healthcare provider will swab your nose and send the swab for testing to see if the bacteria are present.

How is Pertussis treated?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics. Antibiotics can reduce the period of infectiousness from 21 days to 5 days. This can help reduce spread within the community. Antibiotics are most effective if they are started early in the course of the illness.

Is there a vaccine for Pertussis?

Yes, there is a vaccine for Pertussis. It is a combination vaccine that also covers Diphtheria and Tetanus. Depending on age, people can be vaccinated with DTaP or Tdap. DTaP is part of the usual childhood vaccine series in the United States. Boosters are recommended for adults once every 10 years. Pregnant women should also receive a single dose of Tdap during every pregnancy to share some immunity with the baby once they are born.

More information on recommended vaccines here: <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/vaccines/index.html>

What can be done to prevent Pertussis?

Ensuring people are vaccinated as recommended can help prevent Pertussis. If a vaccinated person gets Pertussis, the symptoms are usually less severe. People who are vaccinated are less likely to be hospitalized or die from Pertussis.

Can a person get Pertussis more than once?

Yes, a person can get Pertussis more than once. Immunity following a Pertussis illness is not permanent. People who have had Pertussis previously should still receive Tdap boosters as recommended.

What complications can happen with Pertussis?

Complications are more likely in very young infants and people with certain underlying medical conditions. Complications of Pertussis may include pneumonia, encephalopathy, and death.

What can be done to stop the spread of Pertussis?

Identification of cases through testing can help ensure people are getting treatment, which can reduce the amount of time they can spread the disease to others. People who think they may have Pertussis should see their healthcare provider for evaluation. People who have pertussis are asked to isolate away from others until they are no longer contagious. This means staying home from work, school, daycare, and all other activities until they are no longer contagious.

General advice to prevent all respiratory illnesses include handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes with a tissues, staying home when sick, and avoiding close contact with people who are ill. Routine cleaning and disinfection can also help reduce the number of germs on surfaces and objects.



Related Topics:

- **Reportable Disease Online Form for South Dakota:** sd.gov/diseasereport
- **South Dakota School Immunization Dashboard:** <https://doh.sd.gov/health-data-reports/data-dashboards/school-immunization-dashboard/>
- **South Dakota Infectious Disease Dashboard:** <https://doh.sd.gov/health-data-reports/data-dashboards/infectious-disease-dashboard/>
- **South Dakota Immunization Program:** <https://doh.sd.gov/topics/immunizations-vaccinations/>
- **South Dakota Public Health Lab:** <https://doh.sd.gov/laboratory/>

Resources and Further Reading:

- **CDC, Pertussis Webpage:** <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/index.html>
- **CDC, Prophylaxis Recommendations:** <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/php/postexposure-prophylaxis/index.html>
- **CDC, Pertussis Vaccination:** <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/vaccines/index.html>
- **CDC, Vaccine Schedules and General Information:** <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/>