

Diseases Fact Sheet - Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

South Dakota Department of Health

Office of Disease Prevention Services - 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. We are not able to answer personal medical questions. Please see your health care provider concerning appropriate care, treatment or other medical advice.

What is it?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a very contagious disease of the respiratory tract. It is caused by a bacteria (*Bordetella pertussis*) found in an infected person's mouth, nose, and throat.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially, symptoms resemble a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever, and a mild cough. Within two weeks the cough becomes more severe and is characterized by episodes of numerous and rapid coughs often followed by vomiting, "crowing" or high-pitched whoops. A thick, clear mucus may be discharged. These episodes may recur for one to two months and are more frequent at night. Symptoms gradually go away. Older people or partially immunized children generally have milder symptoms.

Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis can occur at any age. It is most severe in babies under 6 months old, especially in preterm and unvaccinated infants.

How is pertussis spread?

Transmission is by close contact with aerosolized drops discharged during an infected person's coughing or sneezing. Older siblings and adults who may be harboring the bacteria in their nose and throat can infect an infant in the household.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The incubation period is usually 9 to 10 days but may range from 6 to 20 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?

A person can transmit pertussis from 7 days following exposure to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. The period of communicability is reduced to 5 days with antibiotic therapy.

Does past infection with pertussis make a person immune?

Immunity following pertussis is not permanent. Persons with a history of pertussis should receive a single dose of Tdap if it is otherwise indicated.

What are the complications associated with pertussis?

Complications of pertussis may include pneumonia, encephalopathy (brain disorders), and death of 1% of infants younger than 2 months old.

What is the vaccine for pertussis?

The pertussis vaccine is usually given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. There are two types of pertussis vaccine: DTaP and Tdap. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommend that DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis) vaccine be given at 2, 4, 6 and 15 months of age and between 4 and 6 years of age and adolescents 11 - 12 years of age should receive a single dose of Tdap (Tetanus, Diphtheria, and Pertussis vaccine) instead of Td (Tetanus, Diphtheria) vaccine. It is also recommended that adults who have not received Tdap vaccine or for whom vaccine status is unknown should receive a dose of Tdap followed by a Td booster dose every 10 years thereafter. Women should receive a dose of Tdap vaccine during each pregnancy (preferred during 27 to 36 weeks' gestation) regardless of interval since prior Td or Tdap vaccination. Please check with your physician or the Department of Health for the current immunization schedules.

[Learn About Immunizations in South Dakota](#)

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?

Vaccinate your children. The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community. Treatment of cases with certain antibiotics can shorten the contagious period. People who have or may have pertussis should stay away from young children and infants until properly treated. People who have been in contact with an infected person should see their physician, receive antibiotics, and be monitored for respiratory symptoms for 21 days after the last contact. People with pertussis or their contacts may be isolated to prevent the spread of the disease.

[Learn About Immunizations in South Dakota](#)

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- [South Dakota Department of Health, Immunization Program](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
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