

Whooping Cough (pertussis)



Saving Lives:
Integrating
Vaccines for
Adults Into
Routine Care

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough, also known as pertussis, is a serious infection that causes coughing spells so severe that it can be hard to breathe. The disease can even lead to cracked ribs, pneumonia or hospitalization. Adults and adolescents (parents, grandparents and older siblings) typically have a milder form of pertussis; however, they can easily spread the infection to infants and young children, who are at greatest risk of serious complications including death.

Since the 1980s, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of cases of pertussis, especially among teens (10 to 19 years of age) and babies less than five months of age. In 2005, there were more than 25,000 cases reported in the U.S., which is 25 times higher than the all-time low of just over 1,000 cases in 1976.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

Early symptoms of whooping cough are similar to the common cold or bronchitis and may include runny nose, sneezing and low-grade fever. The infection also causes coughing that lasts for weeks, even months. This violent and rapid cough may create a “whooping” sound as the lungs inhale air. However, the “whoop” is not always present, and pertussis is typically most severe in infants, who are at high risk of getting the disease if they come in contact with adults who have it.

Which adults should get vaccinated?

The CDC recommends that every adult 19 to 64 years of age receive one dose of pertussis vaccine. Pertussis vaccine is given in combination with tetanus and diphtheria vaccines (Tdap). Tdap should replace one of the every-10-year booster doses of Td recommended for all adults. In addition, the CDC has issued recommendations for specific adult populations:

- Adults who have not previously received Tdap and who have or who anticipate having close contact with infants younger than 12 months of age (e.g., parents, grandparents younger than 65 years of age, childcare providers, healthcare workers)
- Healthcare personnel in hospitals or ambulatory care settings who have direct patient contact and have not previously received Tdap. Priority is given to vaccination of workers in direct contact with infants younger than 12 months of age.
- Tdap is recommended immediately post-partum for pregnant women who had their last Td vaccine at least 2 years but less than 10 years earlier. Women who received their last Td booster 10 or more years earlier should speak with their doctor about receiving either Td or Tdap during or immediately following the pregnancy.

*Did you know...
rates of pertussis have
been increasing in
adolescents and adults?
Adults and adolescents
can give the infection
to infants, who are at a
greatly increased risk of
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Once fully immunized, the Tdap vaccine provides up to 85-percent protection against pertussis.