

**Mission:**

To protect, promote & improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county & community efforts.



Ron DeSantis  
Governor

Vision: To be the Healthiest State in the Nation

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## PERTUSSIS FACT SHEET

### What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called “whooping cough,” is a very contagious disease caused by bacteria (germs). Pertussis is usually mild in older children and adults, but it often causes serious problems in very young children (i.e., infants less than one year of age).

### What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis symptoms have two stages. The first stage (which lasts 1 to 2 weeks) begins like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing, mild fever, and cough which slowly gets worse. The second stage is marked by uncontrolled coughing spells and a whooping noise (in young children) when the person inhales. During severe coughing spells, a person may vomit or become blue in the face from lack of air. Between coughing spells, the person often appears to be well. The coughing spells may be so bad that it is hard for babies to eat, drink or breathe. This coughing stage may last for 6 weeks or more. Adults, teens, and vaccinated children often have milder symptoms that mimic bronchitis or asthma. Some infants may only have apnea (failure to breathe), and may die from this.

### How is pertussis spread?

The germs that cause pertussis live in the nose, mouth and throat, and are sprayed into the air when an infected person sneezes, coughs or talks. Other people nearby can then inhale the germs. Touching a tissue or sharing a cup used by someone with pertussis can also spread the disease. The first symptoms usually appear about 7 to 10 days after a person is exposed. Infants often get pertussis from older children or adults.

### Who gets pertussis?

Pertussis is most common among infants less than a year old, but anyone can get it. Pertussis can be hard to diagnose in very young infants, teens and adults because their symptoms often look like a cold with a nagging cough.

### Is pertussis dangerous?

It can be, especially for infants. Pertussis can cause breathing problems (apnea), pneumonia, and swelling of the brain (encephalopathy), which can lead to seizures and brain damage. Pertussis can also cause death (rarely), especially in very young infants.

### How is pertussis diagnosed?

A doctor may think a patient has pertussis because of the symptoms, but a sample of mucus must be taken from the back of the nose for testing. This sample is then tested by a laboratory to determine whether the patient has pertussis.

### How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics can make the disease milder if they are started early enough, and will help to prevent transmission of the illness to others. Doctors may prescribe antibiotics to persons exposed to pertussis to prevent the disease, even if they were vaccinated. In addition, it is helpful to get plenty of rest and fluids. Treatment for young children may include supportive therapy such as fluids, oxygen, and mild sedation to help the child during the prolonged period of coughing.

### Can pertussis be prevented?

Yes, there is a vaccine to prevent pertussis. It is given along with diphtheria and tetanus vaccines in the same shot (called DTaP or Tdap). Five doses of vaccine, given in a series starting at 2 months of age, are needed to protect a child from pertussis. An adolescent and adult booster vaccine is recommended for persons 11-12 years and older. The vaccine works for most children, but it wears off after a number of years.