



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

Public Health – Muskegon County

Pertussis Fact Sheet

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious severe respiratory (lung) infection caused by bacteria.

Outbreaks of pertussis were first described in the 16th century, and the organism was first isolated in 1906. In the 20th century pertussis was one of the most common childhood diseases and a major cause of childhood death in the United States. In the 1940s, pertussis vaccine was discovered and decreased the occurrence of pertussis by 98%.

Pertussis is a vaccine preventable infection.

How is it transmitted?

Pertussis is spread by direct contact with respiratory droplets from an infected person, such as through coughing or sneezing.

How is it treated?

Because pertussis is a bacterial infection, antibiotics are of some value. Azithromycin is the drug of choice. It is often given to all household and other close contacts of persons with pertussis, regardless of age and vaccination status.

What is the incubation period?

The incubation period of pertussis is commonly 7 to 10 days, with a range of 4 to 21 days, and rarely may be as long as 42 days. The illness is divided into three stages.

What are the symptoms?

The first stage is characterized by:

- Runny nose,
- Sneezing,
- Low-grade fever, and
- A mild, occasional cough.

These initial symptoms are similar to the common cold. The cough gradually becomes more severe, and after 1-2 weeks, the second stage of the illness begins.

The second stage is when the diagnosis of pertussis is usually suspected and is characterized by:

- Severe coughing episodes, and
- A high pitch whooping noise.

During such an episode, the person may turn blue. Children and young infants, especially, appear very ill and distressed. These episodes occur more often at night. This stage of the illness usually lasts 1 to 6 weeks, but may last for up to 10 weeks.

The third and final stage is characterized by:

- Gradual recovery, and
- Weakened cough that disappears over 2 to 3 weeks.

However, coughing attacks often recur with other respiratory infections for many months after the pertussis infection. Fever is generally minor throughout the course of pertussis.

For more information:

If you suspect you have or have been exposed to pertussis, please call your health care provider.

If you would like more information about pertussis or vaccination, call Public Health – Muskegon County, Monday-Friday, 8:00-5:00, at:

- (231) 724-4723 (Communicable Disease)
- (231) 724-1220 (Immunization)

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