

Frequently asked questions about whooping cough (pertussis)

About whooping cough

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a highly contagious illness caused by bacteria. It mainly affects the respiratory system (the organs that help you breathe).

Are whooping cough and pertussis the same thing?

Whooping cough is the common name for pertussis.

Who can get whooping cough?

People of all ages can get whooping cough.

How serious is whooping cough?

Whooping cough can be very serious, especially for babies and young kids. Whooping cough can cause pneumonia, seizures, brain damage, and death. Less serious illness can occur in older children and in those who have been vaccinated.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

Children and others with whooping cough can have severe coughing spells that make it hard to eat, drink, breathe, or sleep. The cough is often followed by gagging or by a “whooping” sound when breathing in. This sound is how the disease got its name. Infants younger than 6 months may or may not cough. Instead, they may have gagging or life-threatening pauses in breathing or struggle to breathe. Some babies may turn blue because they don’t get enough oxygen and can’t catch their breath. Older kids and adults may just have a bad cough that lasts for multiple weeks,

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually start 5 to 21 days (average 7 to 10 days) after exposure.

How does whooping cough spread?

You can get whooping cough from breathing in pertussis bacteria. This germ comes out of the mouth and nose when someone who has whooping cough sneezes or coughs.

How is whooping cough treated?

Whooping cough is generally treated with antibiotics. It's important to start treatment as soon as possible to slow the spread of the disease. Early treatment may also make the symptoms less severe.

How is whooping cough prevented?

Getting vaccinated is the best way to prevent whooping cough. Using good health manners also helps slow the spread of whooping cough—wash your hands, cover your cough, and stay home when you're sick.

Are some people at higher risk from whooping cough?

Getting vaccinated against whooping cough is especially important for people who are considered high risk or who may expose someone who is at high risk. Infants younger than 6 months of age are at greatest risk for serious complications from whooping cough. Vaccinating pregnant women and others who are in close contact with young infants helps protect them from whooping cough during these early months. Some underlying health problems may also increase risk for serious complications of this disease.

What about people with asthma?

People with moderate to severe asthma could potentially have more serious symptoms if they get whooping cough.

Could I give someone whooping cough even if I don't have a bad cough?

You can have whooping cough without realizing it and unknowingly expose others. That's why it's important to make sure you've had your Tdap vaccine — and especially important if you know you will be around infants under one year old or pregnant women.

All child care workers, childbirth educators, and health care workers who have contact with infants under one or pregnant women should get Tdap vaccine.

How common is whooping cough in Vermont?

There's a whooping cough outbreak in our state right now, meaning more people are sick with whooping cough than usual.

Are there more actual cases of whooping cough than those officially reported?

Whooping cough can be mistakenly diagnosed as something else. Some people can have whooping cough without knowing it, so they don't see their health care provider and it goes undiagnosed and unreported. It's estimated that about one in 10 cases is reported to public health.

What if I was exposed to someone who has whooping cough?

It depends on the extent of exposure. Call your health care provider to discuss whether or not you should be prescribed antibiotics that can prevent you from getting the disease. Preventive treatment is most important for those at high risk of severe disease, or those who are likely to expose high risk people. If you have had an exposure to someone with whooping cough in the last three weeks and you develop a cough, then whooping cough should be suspected, and you should be evaluated by a health care provider with that exposure in mind.

What should I do if I think someone in my family has whooping cough?

If you think you or one of your family members has whooping cough, call your health care provider. Try to stay away from other people until the illness is evaluated. Whooping cough is a possibility if someone has a bad cough, especially if it lasts longer than two weeks, or if the coughing occurs in spells followed by gagging or difficulty catching the breath.

How should employers handle employees returning to work who have had whooping cough?

Employers should talk with their Human Resources Office to understand their company policies, procedures, and labor agreements. Employers should not share individual employee health information with others. The Health Department recommends that people diagnosed with whooping cough stay out of work until completing 5 days of antibiotics, or until the cough has lasted more than three weeks. This helps decrease pertussis transmission.

Are there special cleaning requirements for whooping cough?

While pertussis bacteria can live on a surface or object for several days, most people do not get whooping cough from contact with that surface or object.

Where can I get more information about whooping cough?

- [The Vermont Department of Health](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

About the whooping cough vaccine

What is the whooping cough vaccine?

There are two vaccines for whooping cough:

- DTaP is for babies and children through age six.
- Tdap is for kids seven years and older, adolescents, and adults.

Who needs the whooping cough vaccine?

The whooping cough vaccine is important for people of all ages. If you aren't vaccinated, you aren't protected. If you aren't protected, you may put vulnerable infants at risk.

Who	Which vaccine
<p>Adults (who did not have a Tdap booster as a teenager)</p> <p>Especially:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pregnant women (27-36 weeks) ▪ Health care workers ▪ Anyone who cares for babies less than a year old 	Tdap; one dose
Teens 11 to 18 years old	Tdap; one dose
Kids 7 to 10 years old (who <u>did not</u> get all 5 doses listed below)	Tdap; one dose
Children 2 months to 6 years old	<p>DTaP</p> <p>One dose at each age:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 2 months ▪ 4 months ▪ 6 months ▪ 15-18 months

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How soon can a new baby get the vaccine?

The first dose of DTaP vaccine is usually given at two months, but it can be given as early as six weeks.

What can parents do to help protect children from whooping cough?

Vaccination is the best tool we have for preventing infection, so it's important that everyone—children and adults—get their scheduled whooping cough vaccines. Not following the recommended immunization schedule puts children and teens at higher risk for getting whooping cough..

If your child hasn't followed the recommended immunization schedule, and is seven or older, he or she needs a Tdap vaccine.

If your child is younger than seven and isn't up-to-date, talk to his or her health care provider right away about getting caught up with DTaP.

How often should adults get the whooping cough vaccine?

All adults should get one dose of the Tdap vaccine. If you had one Tdap vaccine (first introduced in 2005), then you don't need another one. Check with your health care provider to make sure that your immunizations are up-to-date.

If I had whooping cough, should I still get vaccinated?

It's important for everyone to be vaccinated against whooping cough. When someone gets whooping cough, their body develops a natural immunity. However, it's unknown how long that immunity lasts for each person, so routine vaccination against whooping cough is recommended.

Why should I get vaccinated if I don't have close contact with babies?

While you may not have direct contact with babies, you may be around them in public places such as the grocery store or the library. Babies often catch whooping cough from an adult or family member who may not even know they have whooping cough. Babies who get whooping cough are often hospitalized and could die.

How many people are vaccinated in Vermont?

According to data from the National Immunization Survey, vaccination rates in 2011 for children in Vermont are as follows:

Rate	Age	Doses received
88 %	19-35 month old children	4 or more doses of DTaP vaccine
90 %	13-17 year olds	1 dose of Tdap vaccine since age 10

The Tdap vaccination rate for adults in Vermont is not available. The national adult Tdap rate in 2010 was eight percent, according to the [National Health Interview Survey](#). The 2012 whooping cough epidemic has prompted more adults in Vermont to get vaccinated, and data from the state immunization registry and from health plans show more adults vaccinated in 2012 than in 2011.

How many people in a community need to be immunized to reach herd immunity?

Typically, more than 90 percent of a population must be vaccinated against a disease to see general protection for the population (often called “herd immunity” or “community immunity”). However, since pertussis vaccines don’t last a lifetime, it’s hard to judge the percentage of people who would need to be immunized to reach herd immunity.

How well the vaccines work

Do the whooping cough vaccines really work?

Although the vaccines offer protection, they are not as effective as some other vaccines. However, they will help protect both the person who gets the vaccine and those around them who are most vulnerable to whooping cough (like babies).

But can’t people who have been vaccinated still get whooping cough?

Sometimes vaccinated people are exposed and get whooping cough anyway, although it’s usually a milder case. The vaccine also gradually wears off over time. However, it’s important to remember that vaccinated people who get whooping cough usually have milder symptoms, a shorter illness, and are less likely to spread the disease to other people.

How long does the vaccine for younger kids (DTaP) last?

Recent studies show that the DTaP vaccine that young kids get doesn't last as long as expected, and protection gradually wears off over time. Protection is high—about 98 percent—within the first year after getting the fifth DTaP dose. It goes down to about 70 percent by five years later, and probably continues to gradually go down after that.

In the 1990s, the United States switched to a new whooping cough vaccine for kids. This vaccine (DTaP) causes fewer side effects than the old vaccine (DTP) but doesn't last as long. This may explain why there are more whooping cough cases in older children. Teens who are 13-14 years old today are the first group of kids to get only the newer DTaP vaccine as babies; they didn't get any doses of the old vaccine.

How long does the vaccine for older kids, teens, and adults (Tdap) last?

Vaccine experts aren't sure about that yet. There are more reported whooping cough cases among 10-14 year olds—a changing trend across the country that indicates that the duration of protection against whooping cough for Tdap vaccine is shorter than expected.

How many vaccinated people are getting sick?

The percent varies by age range. For teenagers (13-19 years), 67 percent of reported cases had received the Tdap vaccine. For reported cases in children age 11-12 years old, 39 percent had received the Tdap vaccine. For children under age 10, 54 percent were up-to-date with the DTaP series.

Remember, though, protection from the vaccine is very good for several years and wanes (decreases) gradually. It's still very important to get vaccinated. According to data from California's epidemic in 2010, unvaccinated children are more than eight times as likely to get whooping cough as fully vaccinated children.

If the vaccine doesn't last very long, why should I get it?

The vaccine we use now works very well for the first couple of years. Even after five years, children still have 70 percent protection from whooping cough. People who are vaccinated and still get sick have milder, shorter illnesses, and are less likely to spread the disease to others. This is especially important for people who are around babies. Infants who are too young to get vaccinated usually get whooping cough from a family member or caregiver. Infants are at the most risk for getting very sick and potentially dying from whooping cough.

Should I get vaccinated again if I had a Tdap shot a few years ago?

The current recommendation is that everyone 11 years and older should get a one-time dose of Tdap. The only exception is for pregnant women who should have one dose of Tdap with each pregnancy.

Will vaccination recommendations change?

It's possible that the recommendations will change. Information from this epidemic and other large outbreaks like the one in California in 2010 will help the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention develop and adjust recommendations.

The recommendations for Tdap have changed recently. The newest recommendation is that women receive a Tdap vaccine during each pregnancy between 27-36 weeks. In the future, additional boosters of Tdap may be recommended for all adults.

What is the best prevention for teens and adults who are up-to-date with the Tdap vaccine?

Everyone should wash their hands, cover their cough, and stay home when they're sick. It's always best to avoid close contact with someone who has cough or cold symptoms.

Does the flu vaccine affect how well the whooping cough vaccine works?

There's no evidence that the whooping cough vaccine works any differently if you get a flu vaccine. We recommend that everyone six months and older get a flu shot each year. [Learn more about the flu vaccine.](#)

How long are you protected if you get whooping cough?

Once you've had whooping cough, immunity is estimated to last anywhere from four to 20 years. It's a fact that immunity wears off—whether the immunity came from getting the disease or from the vaccine. That's why experts recommend that all children and adults get vaccinated, even if they've had whooping cough.

Vaccine safety and monitoring

Is the vaccine safe?

Research has shown that the whooping cough vaccine is very safe. You can get more information on the safety of the [whooping cough vaccine](#) (DTaP) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

How is the vaccine monitored for safety?

Vaccines go through extensive testing before they're licensed for use. Once a vaccine is in use, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration always continue to monitor the vaccine to make sure that it's safe and effective.

Are there side effects from the vaccine?

Like any medication, vaccines may cause side effects. Most are mild:

- Pain, redness, or swelling at the injection site.
- Mild fever.
- Headache.
- Tiredness.
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or stomach ache.
- Chills, body aches, sore joints, rash, or swollen glands (uncommon).

I'm unsure if I've had the Tdap vaccine; is it harmful to get it again?

For most people, the benefits of protection against whooping cough outweigh the risk of any side effects. Check with your health care provider if you have specific concerns.

Where to get the whooping cough vaccine

Where can I get the whooping cough vaccine?

There are many places that offer whooping cough vaccine:

- Your health care provider.
- Most pharmacies.
- District health offices across the state on December 19 from 10 am – 4 pm, plus other times throughout the season.

Are there vaccination clinics?

A state-wide vaccination event will take place on December 19th at all district health offices from 10 am until 6 pm. Please call your [local office](#) for more information.

How to pay for the whooping cough vaccine

Does insurance pay for my vaccine?

Most insurers cover Tdap. In addition, for those health care providers enrolled in the state Immunization Program, Tdap is provided at no cost, so the patient only pays for the administration fee. There is a free Tdap vaccine clinic for Vermonters (age 11 and older) on December 19, 2012 from 10 am until 6 pm at all district health offices.

Does Medicare cover the vaccine?

Medicare Part D covers the cost of the adult vaccine (called Tdap) for adults aged 65 and older. Since it's a prescription drug benefit, coverage depends on the use of that benefit so far during the year. Call 1-800-633-4227 with questions about Medicare

For pregnant women and new parents

If I'm pregnant, should I get the whooping cough vaccine?

If you're pregnant, you should get the whooping cough vaccine (Tdap) in your third trimester. Getting vaccinated while pregnant helps your baby in two ways: the baby gets some short-term protection from the vaccine you get, and you reduce the risk of exposing your newborn to whooping cough by making sure you're protected. Babies can't be vaccinated against whooping cough until they're about two months old and aren't fully protected until they've had the first four vaccinations of the five-dose DTaP series.

If I recently gave birth, can I get the whooping cough vaccine?

If you just gave birth and haven't received the whooping cough vaccine (Tdap), you should get it right away. Your baby is vulnerable to whooping cough because he or she can't get vaccinated until about two months of age and won't be fully protected until after the first four doses of the DTaP vaccine (given at two, four, six, and 15-18 months of age). Your child will also need a fifth dose of DTaP between age four and six years. Whooping cough is very serious for babies and young children, and the most common way for them to get it is from parents and other caregivers and family members. The best way to protect your baby is to get the vaccine and make sure your children are vaccinated on schedule.

Should new dads and siblings get vaccinated?

All family members living in your house and anyone who will spend time around your new baby—like grandparents and child care providers—should have received one dose of Tdap.

Can I get the whooping cough vaccine if I'm breastfeeding?

If you're breastfeeding and you haven't received the Tdap vaccine as an adult, you should get it right away.

Does breastfeeding protect my baby from whooping cough?

Mothers vaccinated with Tdap can pass some whooping cough antibodies to their babies through breast milk, but this does not provide full protection. The best way to protect a baby who is still too young to be vaccinated is to limit his or her exposure to whooping cough. Ask people who are sick to stay away and make sure you and everyone who is around your baby is vaccinated. Then, as soon as your baby is old enough, get him or her vaccinated and follow the recommended immunization schedule.

For health care workers and providers

Is the whooping cough vaccine required for health care workers?

All health care workers should get one dose of the Tdap vaccine. This helps protect the individual health care workers and their patients. There is no state law that requires health care workers to get the whooping cough vaccine. Some health care organizations have policies that require the staff to be vaccinated.

Are health care workers at risk of getting pertussis due to their close contact with coughing patients?

Yes. The Vermont Department of Health recommends that all health care workers have a Tdap vaccination. Health care workers should stay home when they're sick and use appropriate personal protective equipment to prevent infection when caring for patients with respiratory infections like pertussis and flu.

Do health care providers in Vermont report all people tested for pertussis?

In Vermont, suspected pertussis is reportable regardless of whether a test is performed. Positive pertussis tests are reportable to the health department by laboratories and/or health care providers.