

**Lancaster County Emergency Management Agency
Lancaster County Health Advisory Council
Important Information: Pertussis /Whooping Cough
10/1/2024**

In December 2023, the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) released a PA Health Alert, indicating that Pennsylvania had been seeing an increase in cases along with outbreaks of pertussis across the Commonwealth, primarily among high school students and their close contacts. Cases and outbreaks have continued throughout the summer even though most schools were closed. Recently, news reports have surfaced that pertussis cases in schools are on the rise.

What it is ...

Pertussis is an acute bacterial disease caused by [Bordetella pertussis](#) spread through airborne droplets. The incubation period is typically 7-10 days but can range from 5- 21 days. Patients are infectious from the onset of symptoms until 3 weeks after the cough starts or until after 5 days of appropriate antibiotic treatment.

What it does ...

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a highly contagious respiratory tract infection. In many people, it's marked by a severe hacking cough followed by a high-pitched intake of breath that sounds like "whoop."

What to expect ...

Once you become infected with whooping cough, it takes about seven to 10 days for signs and symptoms to appear, though it can sometimes take longer. They're usually mild at first and resemble those of a common cold:

- Runny nose
- Nasal congestion
- Red, watery eyes
- Fever
- Cough

After a week or two, signs and symptoms worsen. Thick mucus accumulates inside your airways, causing uncontrollable coughing. Severe and prolonged coughing attacks may:

- Provoke vomiting
- Result in a red or blue face
- Cause extreme fatigue
- End with a high-pitched "whoop" sound during the next breath of air

However, many people don't develop the characteristic whoop. Sometimes, a persistent hacking cough is the only sign that an adolescent or adult has whooping cough.

What to do ...

Call your doctor if prolonged coughing spells cause you or your child to:

- Vomit
- Turn red or blue
- Seem to be struggling to breathe or have noticeable pauses in breathing
- Inhale with a whooping sound

Pertussis is generally treated with antibiotics, and early treatment is very important. Treatment may make infection less serious if it is started early, before coughing fits begin. Treatment can also help prevent transmission of the disease to close contacts (people who have spent a lot of time around the infected person). Treatment after three weeks of illness is unlikely to help because the bacteria may be gone from the body, even though symptoms may continue. This is because the bacteria have already done damage to the body.

To prevent the spread of vaccine preventable diseases like pertussis, the DOH reiterates the importance of people of all ages to remain up to date on all vaccines, including pertussis vaccine.

The vaccine consists of a series of five injections, typically given to children at these ages:

- 2 months
- 4 months
- 6 months
- 15 to 18 months
- 4 to 6 years

Vaccine side effects

Side effects of the vaccine are usually mild and may include a fever, crankiness, headache, fatigue or soreness at the site of the injection.

Booster shots

- **Adolescents.** Because immunity from the pertussis vaccine tends to wane by age 11, doctors recommend a booster shot at that age to protect against whooping cough (pertussis), diphtheria and tetanus.
- **Adults.** Some varieties of the every-10-year tetanus and diphtheria vaccine also include protection against whooping cough (pertussis). This vaccine will also reduce the risk of your transmitting whooping cough to infants.
- **Pregnant women.** Health experts now recommend that pregnant women receive the pertussis vaccine between 27 and 36 weeks of gestation. This may also give some protection to the infant during the first few months of life.

Resources:

Pennsylvania Dept of Health (2024)

[Pertussis.pdf \(pa.gov\)](#)

Mayo Clinic (2022)

[Whooping cough - Symptoms & causes - Mayo Clinic](#)