

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

for EMS, Public Safety, and First Responders

## What is pertussis?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a disease that affects the lungs.

## What is the cause of pertussis?

A bacteria known as *Bordetella pertussis*.

## How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread through the air in droplets produced when an infectious person coughs or sneezes (droplet spread). A person can become infected with pertussis when they are directly coughed at or sneezed on by someone who is infectious with pertussis, or if they are very close to a person with pertussis for an extended period of time.

In general, MDH considers people who are within three feet of someone with pertussis for at least 10 hours a week to be close contacts who are at greater risk of becoming infected with pertussis.

## What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The classic symptoms of pertussis start with mild cold-like symptoms, which progress to include sudden, uncontrollable bursts of coughing, gasping for air, and vomiting after a coughing spell. Children may make a high-pitched whooping sound when breathing in after a coughing spell. Whooping is less common in babies and adults. Pertussis is most severe in babies younger than 6 months of age who may have apnea, seizures, and no whoop. Older children and adults typically have milder disease with a cough that can last for many weeks.

## I was immunized for pertussis when I was a child, am I immune?

Probably not. The immunity produced by the pertussis vaccine does not provide lifetime immunity and begins to wear off within a few years of the last dose, which is usually given at age 5-6 years. There is currently no pertussis vaccine that is licensed for people older than 6 years, but such a vaccine should be available in the next few years.

## How can I protect myself from exposure?

Wear a surgical mask, if one is available, when you are in contact with any coughing patient. This will help protect you against pertussis and also against other diseases that are spread by large respiratory droplets. As always, clean your hands after any patient contact. If there is any suspicion that a coughing patient may have a disease such as TB, you should wear an N95 respirator (or PAPR or SCBA). If SARS or avian influenza is suspected; gloves, gown, and eye protection should be worn in addition to using a respirator.

## What if I have an exposure to a patient with pertussis?

If you were wearing a surgical mask, antibiotic prophylaxis would not be recommended. However, if you were not wearing a mask and had close face-to-face contact with an infectious pertussis patient, preventive antibiotics would be recommended.

## If I have the type of exposure to a patient that makes it necessary for me to take antibiotics, will I be able to “carry” this illness home to my family?

You cannot infect others unless you are infected yourself.



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## **What should I do if I have been exposed to a patient with pertussis in the last 21 days and develop a respiratory illness?**

If you develop cold-like symptoms that progress to a cough within 21 days of exposure, you should seek medical attention immediately and make sure your healthcare provider is aware of your exposure, even if you have taken preventive antibiotics.

## **Is pertussis reportable to the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)?**

Yes.

## **How many cases of pertussis are reported each year in Minnesota?**

Most years several hundred cases are reported to MDH, but in 2005, over 1,500 cases of pertussis were reported, the largest number of cases since 1954.

## **Who investigates cases and identifies people who need to take preventive antibiotics?**

MDH or local public health investigates each case and ensures that public safety personnel and first responders who are identified as having been exposed are notified of their exposure and evaluated to determine if they need antibiotic treatment. In some communities and at some hospitals, the hospital infection control practitioner will contact emergency medical services and first responder services with this information.

## **Who do I call if I think I may have been exposed to a patient with pertussis?**

You may call MDH at 651-201-5414 (or toll free at 1-877-676-5414). While MDH staff cannot share a patient's diagnosis without specific permission from the patient or his/her next of kin, they can evaluate your exposure and advise you whether or not antibiotic treatment is indicated. Suspect cases are not always reported to MDH immediately so we may learn of a new case from you.

## **Who do I call if I have other infectious disease questions?**

Please call the Minnesota Department of Health at 651-201-5414 (or toll free at 1-877-676-5414).

### Reference:

American Academy of Pediatrics. Pertussis. In: Pickering LK, ed. Red Book: 2003 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases. 26th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2003: 472-486.

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