

Facts About Pertussis for Adults

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a serious infection that spreads easily from person to person. The infection causes coughing spells so severe that it can be hard to breathe, eat or sleep. It can even lead to cracked ribs, pneumonia or hospitalization.

Pertussis has been on the rise in the United States over the last decade, although the vast majority of cases go unreported. While 25,616 cases were reported to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2005, experts estimate that the true number may actually be up to one million cases annually.

Symptoms

Early symptoms of pertussis are similar to the common cold or bronchitis and may include runny nose, sneezing and low-grade fever. The infection also causes coughing that lasts for weeks, even months. Sometimes a “whoop” sound occurs while gasping for breath during a bad coughing spell. However, the “whoop” is not always present; adults rarely have the classic “whoop.”

Prevention

Whooping cough is most contagious before the coughing starts, so the most effective way to prevent it is through vaccination. The whooping cough booster vaccine for adults (and adolescents) is called Tdap (tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis). Children get a different formulation, called DTaP. Both protect against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis.

Two Tdap vaccines are currently licensed for use in the United States. One preparation can be used for both adults and adolescents, and the other has been approved for use only in adolescents:

- ADACEL (sanofi pasteur) for use in persons ages 11-64 years
- Boostrix (GlaxoSmithKline) for use in persons ages 10-18 years

Who should get the Tdap vaccine?

The CDC recommends that adults 19-64 years of age receive a single dose of Tdap in place of the Td (tetanus-diphtheria) booster previously recommended for all adults. In addition, the CDC has issued recommendations for specific adult populations:

- Adults who have or who anticipate having close contact with an infant <12 months of age (e.g., parents, grandparents <65 years of age, childcare providers, healthcare workers)
- Healthcare personnel in hospitals or ambulatory care settings who have direct patient contact. Priority is given to vaccination of workers in direct contact with infants <12 months of age.
- Pregnant women after delivery, before discharge from the hospital or birthing center.

Vaccine Safety

The Tdap vaccine is safe. Reactions to the vaccine are usually mild. The most common reactions after vaccination is pain and redness at the injection site. Other adverse events are possible. Please consult with your doctor. A healthcare professional should be informed if you have developed Guillain-Barre syndrome within 6 weeks following a prior tetanus vaccination, if you are pregnant or nursing, or if you have experienced Arthus-type hypersensitivity reactions following a prior tetanus vaccine.

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- FACT:** Pertussis is a serious infectious disease that has been on the rise in the United States over the last decade, across all age groups.
- FACT:** Protection against pertussis from early childhood vaccines wears off, leaving adults and adolescents at risk for infection.
- FACT:** The Chinese refer to pertussis as the “cough of 100 days” due to the prolonged, dry cough that is experienced by infected individuals.
- FACT:** Pertussis can be difficult to diagnose because early symptoms may appear like the common cold or bronchitis.
- FACT:** Pertussis causes coughing spells that can affect breathing, eating and sleeping. It can even lead to cracked ribs and hospitalization.
- FACT:** Pertussis causes coughing that lasts for weeks, even months. Sometimes a “whoop” sound occurs while gasping for breath during a bad coughing spell. However, the “whoop” is not always present; adults rarely have the classic “whoop.”
- FACT:** The vast majority of cases are not reported. While 25,616 cases of pertussis were reported to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2005, experts estimate that the true number may actually be up to one million cases annually.
- FACT:** Adults and adolescents can spread pertussis to infants who have not yet had all of their vaccines, even before a cough develops.
- FACT:** Parents, grandparents and older siblings are often the source of pertussis in babies.
- FACT:** A booster vaccine, known as Tdap (tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis), is now available to protect against pertussis. One formulation can be used for adults and adolescents. The other has been approved for adolescents only.
- FACT:** The pertussis booster vaccine protects against two other highly infectious diseases—tetanus and diphtheria.
- FACT:** The CDC recommends that adults 19-64 years of age receive a single dose of Tdap in place of the Td (tetanus-diphtheria) booster previously recommended for all adults.
- FACT:** The CDC also recommends that adults in close contact with infants <12 months of age, healthcare personnel with direct patient contact -- especially with infants <12 months of age -- and pregnant women directly after delivery receive a single dose of Tdap.