Getting schooled in pertussis

A fact sheet

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious bacterial infection of the respiratory system that can cause episodes of severe coughing. Children are routinely vaccinated against pertussis; however, immunity wanes ~5 to 10 years after the last vaccination, leaving adolescents vulnerable to infection.¹

Signs and symptoms of pertussis

• Early symptoms are similar to the common cold—mild fever, runny nose, and cough¹
• Symptoms generally progress to severe, persistent coughing episodes¹
• Coughing episodes may cause vomiting, a hernia, or a broken rib²
• Pertussis can last for 106 days on average and can lead to pneumonia¹,³
• Between coughing spells, patients may look relatively well⁴

Note: The typical high-pitched “whoop” often associated with pertussis is not common in adolescents.⁴ This often causes it to be mistaken for a cold, bronchitis, or the flu.

How is pertussis spread?

• Pertussis is spread by airborne droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes²
• Adolescents are an important reservoir for pertussis, often passing it on to their susceptible peers and household contacts²
• Up to 90% of susceptible individuals can catch pertussis when exposed to an infected person¹
**Facts about adolescents and rising pertussis rates**

- In 2007, 10,454 cases of whooping cough were reported nationwide. Of these cases, 2,610 (25%) were reported among persons 10 to 19 years of age.

- Pertussis immunity wanes ~5 to 10 years after the last childhood vaccination, leaving adolescents vulnerable to infection.

- Most pertussis outbreaks across the country originate in middle and high schools.

- Pertussis is underreported—actual cases may exceed 1 million per year.

- 83% of adolescents with pertussis miss an average of 5.5 days of school.

**Preventing pertussis**

- Immunization is by far the best way to prevent pertussis.

- The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommend that adolescents ages 11 to 18 receive a single dose of Tdap* for booster immunization against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis.

- The preferred age for a Tdap booster shot is 11 to 12 years.

- Helps protect before peak age of exposure at 15 years.

- Some states have vaccination requirements for students entering specific grades; check with your state’s department of health for more information.

**What you can do to help**

- Educate parents and teachers to look out for possible pertussis symptoms and seek appropriate medical evaluation to ensure early detection.

- Educate parents about the risks of waning pertussis immunity in adolescents.

- Encourage parents to talk to their children’s healthcare providers about getting a Tdap booster.

- Be aware of—and prepared for—pertussis outbreaks.

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**Help your students have a healthy school year**

Spread the word about pertussis!

* Tetanus toxoid, reduced diphtheria toxoid, and acellular pertussis vaccine.

References:


