

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

You may be hearing a lot about pertussis (whooping cough) lately. Is this something you should be concerned about? What can you do to help prevent contracting it? What is the County Health Department doing to help prevent the spread of pertussis in the community? This article will review some information which should help answer you questions.

New York State Department of Health requires certain communicable (contagious) diseases diagnosed by a physician, through a laboratory, or other health care provider, to be reported to the local Health Department where the patient resides. The local Health Department is then required through Public Health Law Section 2100-2163 and the New York Code of Rules and Regulations Title 10 chapter II 40, 2.100-2.101 to track, report, intervene and prevent the spread of communicable disease. With timely and accurate reporting, the local health department can respond quickly with necessary interventions to help prevent outbreaks and limit spread. Pertussis is one of over 70 reportable diseases in New York State.

Statewide, New York has seen an increase in pertussis activity. In 2004 there were more than 25,000 cases of pertussis in the United States. More than 8,000 of these cases were among adolescents and more than 7,000 were among adults. Up to 2 in 100 adolescents and 5 in 100 adults with pertussis are hospitalized or have complications. Due to potential health concerns it is important to be diagnosed and treated and also have close contacts receive treatment to prevent development of illness.

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis is an acute infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. It typically progresses in stages. In the first stage the patient often has characteristics of a cold; runny nose, sneezing, low fever and mild cough. During the second stage the cough is typically identified by bursts of numerous, rapid coughs followed by a long inspiratory (breathing in) effort that is accompanied by the characteristic “whoop”. *It is during this second stage that the person becomes contagious.* The third and final stage is the convalescent stage where recovery is gradual. The cough should disappear in 2 to 3 weeks, but may take longer. The disease may increase in summer and fall with peaks occurring in 3 to 5 year cycles. The incubation period (the time from when you are exposed to the bacteria to when you become ill) is usually 5-10 days but can be as long as 21 days. Many people may have the pertussis bacterium and because they do not have symptoms or their symptoms are mild, they may never be diagnosed.

Pertussis is a treatable disease. Early and accurate diagnosis and treatment significantly improves symptoms for the patient and limits spreading the disease to others. Pertussis is especially dangerous to infants (who are not yet fully immunized), the immunocompromised, and the elderly. Complications may include pneumonia, middle ear infection, loss of appetite, dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy (disorders of the brain), apneic episodes (brief cessation of breathing), bacterial pneumonia and death.

Who can get pertussis?

Anyone can contract pertussis. It tends to be most severe in infants and elderly. Older children, adolescents and adults may present with atypical or milder versions of the disease. Even those immunized may get pertussis, though symptoms are usually milder. Immunity wanes over years so “booster” vaccinations are required to maintain protection.

How long is someone contagious?

A person can transmit pertussis from the onset of symptoms to three weeks after the onset of coughing. The period of communicability is reduced to five days after antibiotic therapy is started. A person needs to be excluded from daycare, work and school during this time period to reduce the spread of the disease.

What is the treatment for someone who has pertussis?

Pertussis is cured with antibiotics. Your physician must evaluate you, and if pertussis is suspected, you should be tested prior to treatment.

What is the treatment for someone exposed to a person with pertussis?

Pertussis is primarily spread by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat of infected individuals. Household and other close contacts are treated with antibiotics. The assumption is that they have likely been exposed to the pertussis bacteria over a period of time and antibiotics should kill the germs before there is a chance to develop into an active case. This will also help prevent the spread of the disease to other people. If a close contact has symptoms, they must be evaluated by their physician.

What role does the Health Department have in controlling the spread of the disease?

A nurse from the Health Department will contact the patient to ensure they are aware of their diagnosis and receiving treatment. The nurse also ensures treatment is received by the household and other close contacts. The nurse will work with the patient to collect the names of other contacts that may have had exposure to the patient while he/she was coughing, and places where the patient works or frequently socializes. These names are held in confidence by the Health department nurse for the purpose of comparing to other collected names and places to determine if there is a common link. The Health Department will provide education to the community to help stop the spread of disease, and work with health care providers to keep them up to date about the presence of the disease in the community and recommended treatment options.

How can you reduce chances of contracting pertussis?

To greatly reduce your likelihood of contracting pertussis you should be vaccinated against it. Most children receive vaccinations at 2, 4, 6 and 12-15 months of age, and again at age 4-5. New this year, New York State is requiring 6th graders to receive an additional pertussis vaccination. In June 2005, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) voted to recommend the routine use of Tdap (Tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis) vaccine in adolescents aged 11-18 years to replace tetanus and diphtheria toxoids (Td) vaccines. The primary objective of this booster shot is to protect adolescents and adults against pertussis, as the effectiveness of the initial vaccinations may diminish over time. It is hoped that the widespread use of Tdap vaccine in

adolescents and adults may help to reduce transmission of pertussis to young infants who are at the highest risk of severe pertussis. The Tdap vaccine is available for people aged 11-64.

Pertussis is spread through droplets from infected persons who are coughing. Stay home from work or school if you are ill. Contact your healthcare provider if you have had a bad cough for a week or more. If you have been diagnosed with pertussis, take your antibiotics as directed and stay away from groups (including church, daycare, school or work) until you have been on antibiotics for 5 days, when you should no longer be contagious.

What else should I know about pertussis?

If you have any questions about pertussis or exposure, you can contact Otsego County Department of Health at 607-547-4230, or your healthcare provider. Additional information can be found at The New York State Department of Health website at <http://www.health.state.ny.us/healthaz/>, and <http://www.nfid.org/whoop/consumers.html>