

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Quicksheet

December 2025

## Background

Pertussis, more commonly known as Whooping Cough, is a very contagious respiratory illness caused by bacteria that spreads from person to person. Whooping cough can be very serious, especially for babies. The infection is typically characterized by the “whooping” sound following a coughing fit.

## Symptoms

Whooping cough symptoms present in 3 stages and typically begin 5 to 10 days following exposure.

### Stage 1:

- May last 1-2 weeks
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Low-grade fever (less than 100.4°F)
- Mild, occasional cough (babies do not do this)
- Pauses in breathing (apnea) and turning blue/purple in babies

### Stage 2:

- Can last 1 – 6 weeks, may extend to 10 weeks
- Paroxysms – rapid, violent, and uncontrolled coughing fits
  - Can make “whoop” sound after coughing fit to catch breathe
  - Vomit during or after coughing fit
  - May struggle to breathe
- Many babies may struggle to breathe instead of coughing
- The “whoop” may not be present in vaccinated individuals at all

### Stage 3:

- Can last 2 – 3 weeks
- Recovery stage
- Cough becomes milder and less common as you recover

## How Whooping Cough Spreads

Whooping cough spreads via droplets in the air when a person with flu coughs, sneezes, or talks. These droplets then land on the mouth or nose of people nearby.

## How Contagious is Whooping Cough

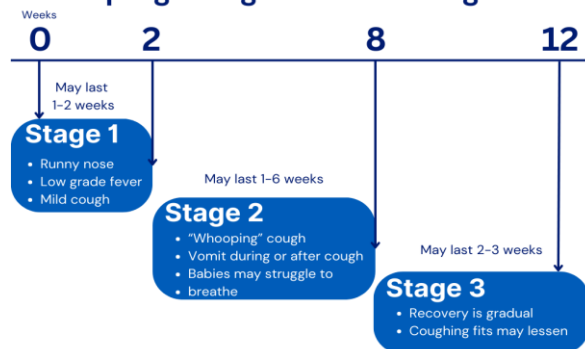
Whooping cough is extremely contagious. People can be contagious from the start of the first symptoms and for at least 2 weeks after coughing begins. Even those with mild symptoms can still spread whooping cough.

Many babies who get whooping cough are infected by an older sibling, parent, or caregiver who does not know they are contagious. **Individuals who are vaccinated are at lesser risk but can still become infected with whooping cough.**

## Prevention

1. Children stay up to date with the pertussis vaccine
2. Adults should get a Td or Tdap booster every 10 years
3. Preventative antibiotics prescribed by your doctor if you have been exposed to whooping cough and they believe you are at risk for serious disease

## Whooping Cough Disease Progression



For general information and assistance, contact the Delaware County Health Department Wellness Line

Phone: (484)-276-2100 (Available 24/7) • Email: [DelcoWellness@co.delaware.pa.us](mailto:DelcoWellness@co.delaware.pa.us)