Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a bacterial infection of the respiratory tract (nose, throat, airways and lungs.) Although, at first, it may seem like an ordinary cold, whooping cough may turn more serious, especially in infants. Pertussis is most contagious before the coughing starts.

There have been more outbreaks of pertussis in Wisconsin in recent years. The best way to prevent pertussis is immunization (getting the vaccine). This is best done during early childhood. There is also a one-time pertussis booster vaccine (Tdap) for teens and adults.

**Diagnosis and treatment**
- A medical history, swabs of your nose and throat, blood tests and/or a chest X-ray may be done.
- Once diagnosed, antibiotics will be given to kill the bacteria. They work best when given early on. Always take all doses of the antibiotic.
- Prevent the spread of illness to others (no school, daycare or work for the first 5 days of antibiotic treatment).
- Follow your doctor’s advice about handling coughing spells.
- Young babies or children with complications may need treatment in the hospital. (In the hospital the child can be watched for breathing problems, given oxygen if needed, and treated to remove thick mucus).

Complications of pertussis include pneumonia, apnea (episodes of where breathing stops), seizures, brain damage and even death. Most deaths occur in unvaccinated children or infants too young to be vaccinated.

**Prevention**
- Pertussis can be prevented with the pertussis vaccine, which is a part of the routine immunization (vaccination) series. Most children should receive 5 doses of vaccine before they have their 6th birthday.
- If you or your child has pertussis, talk with your doctor about treating those who have had close contact to prevent the spread to others. The public health department may contact you so they can investigate if others, such as classmates, need testing or treatment.
- Always use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing. Wash your hands frequently, especially after touching your nose and mouth.

**Signs and symptoms**

**The first symptoms are like a common cold**
- Runny nose, sneezing, mild fever and a mild cough.
- This is when it is the most contagious.
- These symptoms last 1 to 2 weeks.

**As the cough and illness become worse:**
- Thick, glue-like mucus makes it very hard to eat, drink and breathe.
- The lips and nails may turn blue due to lack of oxygen during severe coughing spells.
- The person may vomit, gag and be completely exhausted after coughing spells.
- This stage can last 4 to 6 weeks.

Even as the symptoms get better, the final stages of coughing can last several weeks or months (more like a bronchitis, especially in adults).

**How infection is spread**
- Infection starts to spread before the symptoms are present.
- It is easily spread through close contact, such as talking, sneezes or coughing.
- It usually takes about 5 to 10 days to show signs of illness after being infected.
Call the doctor if:

• You think you or your child has pertussis
• Your child has been exposed to someone with pertussis, even if your child has already received all of the scheduled vaccines
• You or your child has prolonged, severe coughing spells, especially if these spells make the child turn red or blue, are followed by vomiting, or occur together with a “whooping” sound when breathing (When arriving at the doctor’s office or hospital patients are asked to put a mask on to prevent spreading bacteria.)
• You have any questions or concerns