

Minnesota Department of Health

# Pertussis: What Parents Need to Know

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a persistent cough illness. Anyone of any age can get pertussis.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The first symptoms of pertussis are similar to a cold. After a week or two, the cough worsens and begins to occur in sudden, uncontrollable bursts. Persons with pertussis may seem well between coughing spells. The coughing spells become less frequent over time, but may continue for several weeks or months until the lungs heal.

Vomiting can occur following coughing. Children may make high-pitched whooping sounds when gasping for breath after coughing.

Is there a lab test for pertussis?

To test for pertussis, the nasal passage is swabbed. The material on the swab is then examined in the lab for the presence of pertussis bacteria. Only persons with symptoms of pertussis should be tested.

How long should someone with pertussis stay home from child care, school, or work?

Persons with pertussis should stay home from child care, school, work, and other activities until they have finished 5 days of antibiotics, unless they have already been coughing for 3 or more weeks.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis bacteria are spread through droplets produced during coughing or sneezing. These droplets don't travel very far through the air and usually only infect persons near by.

When and for how long can a person spread pertussis?

Persons with pertussis can spread it to others in the first 3 weeks of coughing if not treated with antibiotics. After a person with pertussis has taken antibiotics for 5 days, he or she can no longer spread the disease.

Although the cough can last longer than 3 weeks, a person is no longer contagious after the third week.

How can pertussis be prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis is to be vaccinated. In addition to routine childhood immunizations, a pertussis vaccine booster is recommended for adolescents and adults. The booster shot (Tdap) is given in combination with tetanus and diphtheria. Ask your healthcare provider for more information.

Persons who have completed some or all of the recommended vaccinations for pertussis may still get pertussis disease, but will generally have a milder illness.

Antibiotics are sometimes recommended and prescribed to prevent pertussis in close contacts of someone with pertussis.

**Contact your healthcare provider if your child develops pertussis-like symptoms or have been exposed to someone with pertussis.**

### More Tips!

Wash your hands often.

Stay at home if you are ill.

When coughing, cover your mouth with a tissue or cough into your sleeve.



Vaccine-Preventable Disease Surveillance  
 P.O. Box 64975  
 St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
 651-201-5414, 1-877-676-5414  
[www.health.state.mn.us/immunize](http://www.health.state.mn.us/immunize)

# Pertussis: School and Activities Exclusion Recommendations

		Reason student seen in clinic					
		Evaluation of Symptoms*					
Prophylaxis recommended by public health due to significant exposure. <b>No symptoms*</b> Note: If the student has symptoms, evaluate for pertussis and test, treat, and exclude accordingly. Lab testing is not recommended unless symptoms are present.		Pertussis not suspected		Pertussis suspected; cough duration greater than 3 weeks**		Pertussis suspected; cough duration 3 weeks or less	
		NP specimen collected	No NP specimen collected	NP specimen collected	No NP specimen collected	NP specimen collected	No NP specimen collected
		<b>Antibiotics prescribed for pertussis</b>	<b>Do not exclude.</b>  Note: If the student has symptoms, evaluate for pertussis and test, treat, and exclude accordingly. Lab testing is not recommended unless symptoms are present.	<b>Do not exclude.</b> <i>Note: Treatment is not recommended unless pertussis is suspected. School or public health may contact provider to discuss why antibiotics were prescribed.</i>	<b>Do not exclude.</b> <i>Note: Treatment is not recommended unless pertussis is suspected. School or public health may contact provider to discuss why antibiotics were prescribed.</i>	<b>Do not exclude.</b> <i>Note: Treatment is not recommended after 3 weeks of cough illness.</i>	<b>Exclude until pertussis ruled out by lab test***, or 5 days of antibiotics are completed.</b>
<b>Antibiotics not prescribed for pertussis</b>	<b>Do not exclude.</b> <i>Note: School or public health may contact provider to discuss why antibiotics were not prescribed.</i>	<b>Do not exclude.</b> If test is positive, start treatment and exclude until 5 days of antibiotics are completed (unless cough duration is now greater than 3 weeks).	<b>Do not exclude.</b>	<b>Do not exclude.</b>	<b>Exclude until pertussis ruled out by laboratory test***. If test is positive, start treatment and exclude until 5 days of antibiotics are completed (unless cough duration is now greater than 3 weeks).</b> <i>Note: Deferring treatment of suspect cases pending lab results is not recommended.</i>	<b>Exclude for 21 days from cough onset if suspect case is not tested and ruled out***, or treated.</b> <i>Note: Testing and treatment is recommended for all suspect cases.</i>	

\*Pertussis-like symptoms can include paroxysmal cough with or without post-tussive vomiting or whoop. Coryza may indicate early pertussis (catarrhal phase).

\*\*Pertussis is infectious only during the first 3 weeks of cough. Treatment and school exclusion are not recommended after that time although the cough may persist much longer.

\*\*\*A negative test result does not definitively rule out pertussis. Treatment and exclusion should be based on clinical judgment.

NP = nasopharyngeal