

Whooping Cough and the Vaccine (Shot) to Prevent It

Last updated April 2017

The best way to protect against whooping cough (pertussis) is by getting the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis shot (called DTaP). Doctors recommend that all children get the vaccine.

Why should my child get the DTaP shot?

The DTaP shot:

- Helps protect your child from whooping cough, a potentially serious disease, as well as diphtheria and tetanus.
- Helps to prevent your child from having violent coughing fits from whooping cough.
- Helps keep your child from missing school or child care (and keeps you from missing work to care for your sick child).

Is the DTaP shot safe?

Yes. The DTaP shot is very safe. Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects. Most children who get the DTaP shot have no side effects.

What are the side effects?

Most children don't have any side effects from the shot. The side effects that do occur are usually mild and may include:

- Redness, swelling, or pain where the shot was given
- Fever
- Vomiting

These types of side effects happen in about 1 out of every 4 children who get the shot.

More serious side effects are very rare but can include:

- A fever over 105 degrees
- Nonstop crying for 3 hours or more
- Seizures (jerking, twitching of the muscles, or staring)

CDC recommends the tetanus-diphtheria-pertussis shot for everyone 11 years old and older, including pregnant women. This shot for older children and adults is called Tdap.

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough—or pertussis—is a very serious respiratory (in the lungs and breathing tubes) infection caused by the pertussis bacteria. It can cause violent coughing fits. Whooping cough is most harmful for young babies and can be deadly.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

Whooping cough starts with the following symptoms:

- Runny or stuffed-up nose
- Mild cough
- A pause in breathing in babies (apnea)



Doctors recommend that your child get five doses of the DTaP shot for best protection. Your child will need one dose at each of the following ages:

- 2 months
- 4 months
- 6 months
- 15 through 18 months
- 4 through 6 years



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Coughing can start 1 to 2 weeks after being exposed to the bacteria. Children and babies may then begin to develop these more serious problems:

- Coughing very hard, over and over. These coughing fits happen more at night.
- Gasping for breath after a coughing fit. They may make a “whooping” sound. This sound is where the name “whooping cough” comes from. Babies may not cough or make this sound—they may gag and gasp.
- Difficulty breathing, eating, drinking, or sleeping because of coughing fits.
- Turning blue (while coughing) from lack of oxygen.
- Vomiting after coughing fits.

Coughing fits can last for 10 weeks, and sometimes happen again the next time the child has a respiratory illness.

Is it serious?

Whooping cough is most dangerous for babies and young children. In fact, babies younger than 1 year old who have whooping cough may:

- Need to be cared for in the hospital
- Develop pneumonia (a serious lung infection)
- Have seizures
- Suffer brain damage

Whooping cough can even be deadly. Since 2010, up to 20 babies have died each year from whooping cough in the United States. Most of these babies don’t have protection against whooping cough because they are too young to get the shots.

How does whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough spreads easily through the air when a person who has whooping cough breathes, coughs, or sneezes. Almost everyone who is not immune to whooping cough will get sick if exposed to it. A person can spread the disease from the very beginning of the sickness (when he has cold-like symptoms) and for at least 2 weeks after coughing starts.

Since symptoms can be mild for some people, your baby can catch whooping cough from adults, grandparents, or older brothers or sisters who don’t know they have the disease.

How can I help protect my child against whooping cough?

- Get your Tdap shot in the third trimester of every pregnancy.
- Make sure your baby gets all of his doses of DTaP on time.
- Encourage anyone who will be in contact with your baby to be up-to-date with their whooping cough vaccine.

Do people still get whooping cough in the United States?

Yes. Since 2010, between 15,000 and 50,000 cases of whooping cough are reported each year in the United States.

Before the whooping cough vaccines were recommended for all infants, about 8,000 people in the United States died each year from whooping cough. Today, because of the vaccine, this number has dropped to fewer than 20 per year.

But, cases of whooping cough have been increasing over the past several years, and outbreaks of whooping cough can occur. We don’t know exactly why the number of cases is increasing, but we think it’s a combination of many different reasons, including:

- Doctors and nurses are more aware of whooping cough and recognize it more often.
- The ways we test for the disease have gotten better.
- Protection from whooping cough vaccines is not long-lasting.

Where can I learn more about the DTaP shot and my child?

To learn more about the DTaP shot, talk to your child’s doctor, call 1-800-CDC-INFO, or visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend all children receive their vaccines according to the recommended schedule.