

Whooping Cough and the Vaccine (Shot) to Prevent It

Last updated July 2014

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

Why should my child get the DTaP shot?

The DTaP shot:

- Protects your child from whooping cough (pertussis), a potentially serious disease (and also protects against diphtheria and tetanus)
- Protects other people who can't get the vaccine—especially newborn babies, who can get very sick and die from whooping cough
- Prevents your child from having violent coughing fits from whooping cough
- Keeps your child from missing school or childcare (and keeps you from missing work to care for your sick child)

Is the DTaP shot safe?

Yes. The DTaP shot is very safe, and it is effective at preventing whooping cough (and two other diseases: diphtheria and tetanus). 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. When side effects do occur, they are usually mild, like redness, swelling, and pain from the shot, fever, and vomiting. They happen in about 1 child out of every 4 children who get the shot.

More serious side effects are rare but can include:

- A fever over 105 degrees
- Nonstop crying for 3 hours or more
- Seizures (jerking or 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 causes violent coughing you can't stop. 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
- Sneezing
- Mild cough
- A pause in breathing in infants (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, and
- 4 through 6 years of age



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After 1 to 2 weeks, coughing, which can be severe, starts. Children and babies may then begin to develop these more serious problems:

- Coughing very hard, over and over.
- 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. These coughing fits happen more at night.
- 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 pertussis may:

- Need to be cared for in the hospital
- Develop pneumonia (a serious lung infection)
- Have seizures (jerking or twitching of the muscles or staring)
- Suffer brain damage

Whooping cough can even be deadly. From 2000 through 2012, there were 255 deaths from whooping cough reported in the United States. Almost all of the deaths (221 of the 255) were babies younger than 3 months of age.

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.

Your baby can catch whooping cough from adults, grandparents, or older brothers or sisters who don't know they have the disease. New moms with whooping cough can give it to their newborn babies.

How can I 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 whooping cough vaccine on time.
- Encourage anyone who will be in contact with your baby to be up-to-date with the vaccine.

Do people still get whooping cough in the United States?

Yes. In 2012, whooping cough made more than 48,000 people sick. Sixteen babies died. Most of these babies were too young to be protected against whooping cough by getting the shots.

Before the DTaP shot was given routinely to 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 40.

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.
- More of the bacteria may be circulating.

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 American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommend children receive all vaccines according to the recommended schedule.