

MSAD # 13 / RSU #83

Health Alert

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Important Notice to Parents

Pertussis is an infection of the respiratory system caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis* (or *B. pertussis*). It is characterized by severe coughing spells that end in a "whooping" sound when the person breathes in. It mainly affects infants younger than 6 months old before they're adequately protected by immunizations, and kids 11 to 18 years old whose immunity has faded. People that have been previously immunized and those that have had the disease in the past can still get the infection.

The first symptoms of whooping cough are similar to those of a common cold: runny nose, sneezing, mild cough, low grade fever. After about 1 to 2 weeks, the dry, irritating cough evolves into coughing spells. During a coughing spell, which can last for more than a minute, the child may turn red or purple. At the end of a spell, the child may make a characteristic whooping sound when breathing in or may vomit. Between spells, the child usually feels well.

Although it's likely that infants and younger children who become infected will develop the characteristic coughing episodes with their accompanying whoop, not all of them will. Some infants and younger children as well as adults and adolescents may have milder or atypical symptoms, such as a prolonged cough without the coughing spells or the whoop.

Pertussis is highly contagious. The bacteria spread from person to person through tiny drops of fluid from an infected person's nose or mouth. These may become airborne when the person sneezes, coughs, or laughs. Others then can become infected by inhaling the drops or getting the drops on their hands and then touching their mouths or noses. Infected people are most contagious during the earliest stages of the illness up to about 2 weeks after the cough begins. Antibiotics shorten the period of contagiousness to 5 days following the start of antibiotic treatment.

The incubation period (the time between infection and the onset of symptoms) for whooping cough is usually 7 to 10 days, but can be as long as 21 days.

Pertussis can cause prolonged symptoms. The child usually has 1 to 2 weeks of common cold symptoms, followed by approximately 2 to 4 weeks of severe coughing, though the coughing spells can sometimes last even longer. The last stage consists of another several weeks of recovery with gradual resolution of symptoms. In some children, the recovery period may last for several months.

Whooping cough can be prevented with the pertussis vaccine, which is part of the DTaP (diphtheria, tetanus, acellular pertussis) immunization. DTaP immunizations are routinely given in five doses before a child's sixth birthday. To give additional protection in case immunity fades, the AAP now recommends that kids ages 11-18 get a booster shot of the new combination vaccine (called Tdap), ideally when they're 11 or 12 years old, instead of the Td booster routinely given at this age. Please check with your child's primary care provider to be sure your child is up to date.

If you suspect that your child may have whooping cough, please contact your primary care provider as soon as possible and notify the school immediately if your child is confirmed to have whooping cough.

Please contact the school nurse, Mel Chadbourne, RN if you have any questions. More information is also available at the Maine CDC web site.