What to Know and Do About Whooping Cough

Whooping cough, also known as pertussis, is a highly contagious respiratory illness. It is caused by a type of bacteria that infects the lungs and breathing passages like the nose, mouth, and throat. Anyone can get whooping cough. Some groups are more at risk for severe cases of whooping cough than others, including babies younger than one year old and people with conditions that compromise the immune system.

If you have been exposed to whooping cough, take the following steps to feel better and avoid spreading it to others.

First Steps After Being Exposed to Whooping Cough

Know the Symptoms: Whooping cough is very contagious and can spread through the air. Early symptoms can take five to 10 days, and sometimes up to three weeks, to appear after exposure.

- The first symptoms may include a runny nose, mild fever, and a cough.
- One to two weeks after the first symptoms, some people may develop severe coughs, also known as coughing fits. This period of severe cough may last one to six weeks.

Since early whooping cough symptoms may present like the common cold, infected people can spread the bacteria unknowingly for weeks. For example, babies can get whooping cough from family members and caregivers who do not know they are infected. People with suspected or confirmed whooping cough should especially avoid contact with people who have not been vaccinated, cannot be vaccinated, or who have conditions like asthma that could make whooping cough more severe.

- **Connect with a Healthcare Professional:** If you have spent time with someone with whooping cough or have a severe cough, discuss your symptoms with a healthcare professional. Based on your symptoms, age, and pre-existing medical conditions, your healthcare professional may test for whooping cough. Healthcare professionals may consider treating whooping cough with preventive antibiotics before test results arrive, especially in high-risk groups like babies.

- **Gather Your Recovery Essentials:** If you are diagnosed with whooping cough, starting antibiotic treatment as soon as possible will lessen severe symptoms and help reduce the spread of infection. Most people can manage their symptoms at home with antibiotics, provided in consultation with a healthcare provider. In addition to taking antibiotics, people can keep their homes clean, use a humidifier, and drink water to reduce the severity of whooping cough symptoms.

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Taking Care of Yourself and Others When a Whooping Cough Diagnosis is Confirmed

- **Let Your Close Contacts Know You Have Whooping Cough:** Contact those you've recently spent time with and tell them they should test for whooping cough and watch for symptoms.

- **Stay Home and Isolate from Others:** If you take antibiotics, you should plan to stay home and isolate from those you live with for the full course of the antibiotics, which typically is five days. If you do not take antibiotics, you could be contagious for up to three weeks after the onset of a cough.

- **Track Your Symptoms:** Monitor how your symptoms progress over the next few weeks, even after you are no longer considered contagious. Whooping cough symptoms can continue for several weeks even with antibiotics. Staying hydrated, eating small meals, and taking certain over-the-counter medications may reduce the severity of the symptoms.

- **Know When to Seek Emergency Care:** Whooping cough symptoms can include coughing fits, vomiting during or after the coughing fit, broken ribs, and struggling to breathe. If whooping cough symptoms become severe or unmanageable at home, seek hospital care to avoid complications. In addition to antibiotics, hospital treatment focuses on monitoring breathing, preventing dehydration, and keeping breathing passages clear.

How to Protect Against Whooping Cough

Whooping cough vaccines are the best way to protect against whooping cough for babies, children, and adults. People who receive whooping cough vaccination have a lower risk of severe illness, hospitalization, and death due to the infection than people who are unvaccinated or have not completed the recommended doses. Babies can get the vaccines that prevent whooping cough as soon as two months old, per the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommended immunization schedule. Pregnant people can receive the whooping cough vaccine between 27 and 36 weeks of pregnancy, as early in the window as possible, to help pass protection to newborns under 2 months old.

Sources

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