FACT SHEET
Pertussis (whooping cough)

What is pertussis?
Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a respiratory infection. It is caused by a bacterium – Bordetella pertussis.

Who gets pertussis?
Pertussis can occur at any age, although it is most common in children.

How is pertussis spread?
Pertussis is primarily spread by direct contact with discharges from the nose and throat of infected individuals. Frequently, older brothers and sisters who may be harbouring the bacteria in their nose and throat can bring the disease home and pass on to an infant in the household.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?
Pertussis begins as a mild upper respiratory infection. Initially symptoms resemble those of a common cold, including sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Within two weeks the cough becomes more severe and is characterised by episodes of numerous rapid coughs followed by a crowing or high pitched whoop, often accompanied by vomiting. The illness often lasts for two to three months. In older children and adults, the disease may be mild and not recognised as whooping cough.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?
Symptoms usually appear five to ten days after contracting the infection, but may be as long as 21 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread pertussis?
A person can transmit pertussis from seven days following exposure up to three weeks after the onset of coughing episodes. This period of spread can be reduced if antibiotics are given, within three weeks of the start of the coughing episodes.

What is the vaccine for pertussis?
The vaccine for pertussis is usually given in combination with diphtheria and tetanus. It is recommended that three doses of DTP (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis) vaccine be given with an interval of one month between doses, starting at two months of age. This should be followed by administration of a preschool booster.

What can be done to prevent the spread of pertussis?
The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunisation in the community. Treatment of cases with antibiotics such as erythromycin can shorten the infectious period.

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