



## Frequently Asked Questions: Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

1. *What is Whooping Cough (Pertussis)?*

In 2008 there were more than 13,000 reported cases of Pertussis including 18 deaths nationally. Pertussis, or whooping cough, is an acute and highly contagious disease caused by a bacteria, *Bordetella pertussis*. Pertussis symptoms can be different depending on age and vaccination status. Pertussis usually starts with cold like symptoms, and maybe a mild cough that progresses to a cough with spasms in 1-2 weeks. Infants and children with Pertussis can cough violently until the air is gone from their lungs forcing them to inhale with a loud “whooping” sound. The pattern of extreme coughing can lead to vomiting and exhaustion.

2. *Are adults susceptible to Whooping Cough (Pertussis)?*

Unvaccinated, incompletely vaccinated, or adults that haven’t received a booster dose of Pertussis vaccine are especially susceptible to Pertussis infection. Most importantly because Pertussis illness tends to be milder in adults, they are often not aware their cough is caused from Pertussis, are unaware they are contagious, so are often found to be the source case during Pertussis outbreaks.

3. *How is Whooping Cough (Pertussis) transmitted?*

People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. Many infants who get pertussis are infected by parents, older siblings, or other caregivers who often don’t know they have the disease.

4. *How can you tell a cold, bronchitis and Whooping Cough (Pertussis) from each other?*

Through careful evaluation of the clinical history, including reports of a persistent cough lasting more than 2 weeks with characteristics of a ‘whoop’, paroxysms (coughing episodes that can’t be stopped), or posttussive vomiting (vomiting after coughing episode). Specific lab tests can also identify the disease but may be more reliable earlier in the disease process.

5. *If most infants in the U.S. have received the DTaP vaccines, why is there an epidemic in California involving infants?*

There have been over 900 cases this year in California, 4 times the number recorded last year. From those cases there have been 5 infant deaths. It is important to know that while a number of states are reporting increases in the number of Pertussis cases occurring in 2010, other states are reporting less number of cases compared to last year. Pertussis occurs in a cyclical pattern, with the number of cases peaking every 3 to 5 years as people’s immunity from the vaccine wears off and the disease causing bacteria begin circulating again. In

### Division of Public Health

addition to waning immunity, there are other factors that contribute to the increased incidence of Pertussis including improved recognition of Pertussis cases and better diagnostic testing and disease reporting.

6. *Are you concerned about a Whooping Cough (Pertussis) outbreak in Georgia?*  
Georgia is no different than other states when it comes to adequate Pertussis booster coverage among adolescents and adults, most frequently the ages when Pertussis immunity from childhood vaccines begins to wane. An adolescent/adult Pertussis booster vaccine (TDaP) has been available in the U.S. since 2005. A great number of adolescents and adults continue to need the vaccine to prevent and control Pertussis.

7. *How long does immunity last in children? Adults? When should each group get a booster dose?*

Immunity can begin to wane in 5 years after the primary vaccine series is completed at 15-18 months of age. Children should receive a booster dose before beginning school, this dose is usually given at 4 years of age. Only one dose of Tdap can be given in a lifetime and currently it is recommended routinely for all adolescents at 11-12 years of age and for adults at first opportunity. Special emphasis should be placed to vaccinate women that are planning a pregnancy and on those that have just delivered to prevent potential disease transmission to newborns.

8. *Who should consider receiving a dose of TDaP vaccine?*

The vaccine is routinely recommended for adolescents at 11-12 years of age when other vaccines are given and for older adolescents and adults even if it has been less than 10 years since their last Tetanus booster. It is especially important for females planning pregnancy, new mothers, and family members and caregivers of infants to be vaccinated with TDaP.

9. *Where are TDaP vaccines available? What is required to receive a TDaP vaccine?*

TDaP vaccine is available at every health department in Georgia for ages 10-64 FREE of charge, regardless of insurance coverage. If an older adolescent or adult hasn't received a Tetanus booster since 2005, when TDaP was licensed, then a dose of TDaP is called for.

**Division of Public Health**

M. Rony Francois, MD, MSPH, PhD, Director of Public Health and State Health Officer ♦ Phone: 404-657-2700 ♦ Fax: 404-657-2715