

RETURN OF WHOOPING COUGH

Cases of pertussis, commonly known as whooping cough, declined during the COVID epidemic because of the minimal social contact. However, this highly contagious disease is now becoming even more prevalent than in 2019. In fact, six times as many cases were recorded in 2024 than in 2023. Most cases are preventable with vaccination and boosters.

Whooping cough can be treated with antibiotics if it is caught early. However, it is rarely diagnosed in its early stages because initially it resembles a common cold. After one or two weeks it progresses to severe and frequent coughing fits that may last as long as 10 weeks. These fits are so severe that they may be accompanied by vomiting, exhaustion, and broken ribs and followed by the characteristic “whooping” sound during inhalation. At this point the antibiotics are not helpful. Symptoms are worst in unvaccinated babies and children. Complications in babies may be as severe as apnea, pneumonia, convulsions and brain encephalopathy.

The vaccine for pertussis usually prevents the disease or decreases its severity. The vaccine for pertussis is given to babies three times during their first year, and is followed up by two more by the time they reach age 6. Immunity from the vaccine diminishes over time, so boosters are necessary about every ten years. Often new cases are due to not receiving regular booster shots. The CDC recommends that pregnant women receive the vaccine early in the third trimester of every pregnancy, so as to pass on immunity to their newborns. All adults, including grandparents, who have contact with a newborn should be up to date on their pertussis vaccine before they visit or spend time with the baby.

Regardless of your age, timely vaccination is the best way to protect yourself, your loved ones, and the general population from whooping cough. Most primary care doctors are able to provide this vaccine. It may also be available at some pharmacies. Bergen County offers vaccines at its two Bergen New Bridge Medical Center locations. If you have any questions about the vaccine, please discuss these with your physician.