Pertussis Encyclopedia Article

Pertussis

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Pertussis

A serious, highly contagious disease caused by bacteria, for which there is a vaccine available.

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a highly contagious disease caused by airborne bacteria. Pertussis is rarely seen in countries where **immunization** is widespread; however, prior to the availability of the vaccine, hundreds of thousands of cases of pertussis were reported in the United States each year. The name pertussis comes from the pertussis bacteria, which are spread when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or simply talks. Pertussis attacks the breathing passages, producing inflammation in the bronchial passages and narrowing the airways. Violent coughing and choking that interfere with eating, drinking, and in severe cases, breathing are the primary symptoms. The illness got its nickname—whooping cough—from the gasping deep breaths the pertussis patient takes between coughing episodes. Pertussis infections begin with symptoms similar to the common cold, but progress in a week or two, with the coughing becoming severe. A pediatrician should be consulted if pertussis symptoms appear. Pertussis should be suspected if the child is a young infant and has not been immunized. The symptoms persist for several weeks, contributing to the seriousness of the disease. Nearly 75% of pertussis cases reported worldwide are in children; half of those children affected will require hospitalization.

The pertussis vaccine (the "P" in DTP vaccine) has been the subject of great controversy because it had been linked to side effects ranging from mild to serious, including irritability, **seizures,** fever, and brain damage. The **American Academy of Pediatrics** urges all parents of healthy, normally developing infants and children to continue with the full course of immunizations despite the very slight risk of serious side effects. The risk associated with the pertussis infection is much greater; one child in every thousand who contract pertussis dies. Some developed countries stopped giving the pertussis vaccine when the study results were first made public, and the incidence of pertussis has increased dramatically in those areas.

For Further Study

Organizations

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)
Address: 9000 Rockville Pike
NIH Building 31, Room 7A50
Bethesda, MD 20892-2520
Telephone: (301) 496-5717
(Arm of the National Institutes of Health that deals with allergies and diseases.)



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National Vaccine Information Center
Address: 128 Branch Road
Vienna, VA 22180