

PRESS RELEASE

Health Alert

December 13th, 2024



Whitman County
Public Health

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Whooping Cough (Pertussis) Activity in Whitman County

Questions regarding this information may be directed to the following contacts:

Whitman County Public Health

Disease Prevention Program,

DiseasePrevention@whitmancounty.gov

Whitman County Public Health (WCPH) is investigating a pertussis outbreak within Whitman County. There are 85 pertussis cases identified as of 12/13/2024, an increase of 8 cases from 12/6/24. Four cases have been identified within the Whitman County K-12 school system, affecting two elementary schools.

Alert Categories



Health Alert

Conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.



Health Advisory

Provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.



Health Update

Provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; no immediate action necessary.

Summary

85 individuals in Whitman County as of 12/13/2024 have been diagnosed with a confirmed case of B. pertussis.

We are asking all current cases to **isolate** until they have completed their 5-day course of antibiotics prescribed by their provider.

Isolation means staying away from others—not going to work, school, or public places. It's important that you stay home to avoid spreading the infection to others. If you need to seek healthcare or leave isolation for any reason before you have finished 5 days of antibiotics, please wear a mask to prevent the spread of pertussis.

- Infants under 12 months of age and people with pre-existing health conditions that may be exacerbated by pertussis are at the highest risk of getting very sick from pertussis. Please take extra precautions to protect these people from getting sick.

In response to all confirmed cases this week, we have recommended post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) with antibiotics for all household contacts. While both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals can contract pertussis, symptoms may be more severe in the unvaccinated. Ensure your family's vaccinations are up to date, especially going into the holiday season where large gatherings are more common.

In response to the four confirmed cases in the Whitman County K-12 school system, letters have been sent regarding potential exposures and recommended actions. If you received a letter, please review the guidance on responding to pertussis exposure. At this time, PEP is not recommended for the affected school or classrooms. Parents and guardians should monitor for symptoms, and promptly TEST, TREAT, and ISOLATE to prevent the spread of this highly contagious disease.

Requested Actions

- Be aware of whooping cough (pertussis) potentially circulating in the community.
 - Encourage individuals who have been diagnosed with pertussis to reach out to Whitman County Public Health at 509-332-6752, if they have not already talked with one of our Disease Prevention team members.
- Talk to your healthcare provider if you have been in **close contact** with someone diagnosed with pertussis.

You are considered a **close contact** of someone with pertussis if:

- You live in the same household as someone with pertussis.
- You spent many hours together while they were symptomatic (e.g.: cough, runny nose, low-grade fever, etc.). This could include being in the same room, household, or a confined space like a car.
- You had direct contact with respiratory droplets, such as coughing, sneezing, kissing, or sharing utensils with the infected person.

- Make sure you are up to date with your pertussis immunization (DTaP, Tdap).
- Practice good hand, mouth, and nose hygiene.
 - Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Wash your hands often.
- Stay home when sick and limit your exposure to people who are sick.
 - Whooping cough may begin like a common cold, but unlike a cold, the coughing can last for weeks or months.

For more details on how to prevent pertussis, please see the "Pertussis Prevention" section below.

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a well-known and serious respiratory illness caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*.

How is Pertussis Spread?

Person-to-person spread of pertussis occurs through small drops of spit from your mouth or nose when you talk, cough, or sneeze. Spread is most likely among people who live together or people who spend time together indoors.

What are the Symptoms of Pertussis?

It begins with cold-like symptoms and develops into a bad cough.

Coughing spells can be severe, sometimes ending in gagging or vomiting. Some kids also may have a high-pitched “whoop” after they cough, which is how the disease got its common name. However, infants may not cough at all, and some teens and adults don’t have a “whoop” after they cough.

Complications of pertussis include pneumonia, syncope (passing out), seizures, apnea (stopping breathing), and death. Severe complications are most common in infants.

Who is at High Risk for Pertussis?

People at high risk for severe illness from pertussis:

- Infants under 1 year old are at greatest risk for severe disease and death
- People with pre-existing health conditions that may be exacerbated by pertussis

Those who will have contact with people at high risk:

- Pregnant women in third trimester: Women in their third trimester of pregnancy may be a source of pertussis to their newborn infant.
- All people in high-risk settings: This is focused in particular on settings that include infants under 12 months of age or women in their third trimester of pregnancy. These settings include:
 - Neonatal intensive care units
 - Childcare settings
 - Maternity wards

Pertussis Prevention

Immunization is the most effective way to prevent pertussis.

- DTaP Immunization: For infants and young children, this vaccine is given in a series of five doses (at 2, 4, 6, 15–18 months, and 4–6 years).
- Tdap Immunization: Adolescents (11–12 years old) should receive the Tdap immunization, which provides continued protection against pertussis.
 - If you never received a Tdap booster as an adolescent, a single dose is recommended for adults.
- Pregnancy Vaccination: Pregnant women are advised to receive the Tdap vaccine during the third trimester (between 27 and 36 weeks of pregnancy) for **every pregnancy** to protect newborns before they can receive their vaccinations.

Pertussis vaccines are effective, but not perfect. They typically offer good levels of protection within the first two years after getting the vaccine, but protection wanes over time. In general, DTaP vaccines are 80% to 90% effective.

Practice good hand, mouth, and nose hygiene.

- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw away used tissues in the wastebasket right away.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Stay home when sick and limit your exposure to people who are sick.

- Whooping cough may begin like a common cold, but unlike a cold, the coughing can last for weeks or months.
- If you have respiratory symptoms and must leave home, please consider wearing a mask to prevent spreading small drops of spit from your mouth or nose when you talk, cough, or sneeze.

Pertussis Testing

There are tests available for Pertussis. PCR (Polymerase chain reaction) testing is currently the preferred test method for pertussis.

However, a negative test does not mean a person should stop treatment. The full prescription should be taken as directed by your care provider.

Pertussis Treatment

If pertussis is diagnosed, early treatment with antibiotics can reduce the spread of the disease to others. Close contacts of someone with pertussis may also be prescribed preventive antibiotics.

Diagnosed individuals should **isolate** until they have completed at least 5 days of antibiotic treatment or stay home for 21 days after the onset of symptoms to avoid spreading the infection.