



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**

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Division of Public Health

June 20, 2024

To: Local Health Directors, Summer Camp Directors, and Child Care Directors

From: Erica Wilson, MD, MPH, Medical Director, Medical Consultation Unit

Subject: **Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Prevention at Summer Camps**

The North Carolina Division of Public Health (NC DPH) is working with local health departments to investigate recently reported cases of pertussis (whooping cough) among infants and children in several communities in North Carolina, including outbreaks in Ashe, Buncombe, Henderson, and Transylvania, counties in western North Carolina. As of June 20, 2024, 253 cases have been identified throughout the state with additional cases under investigation. In calendar year 2023, only 103 pertussis cases were reported statewide.

It is important to remain vigilant for children exhibiting signs and symptoms of pertussis and take the necessary steps to reduce the spread of the disease in schools, child care centers, and camps. Early symptoms can last for one to two weeks and are often mild, like a common cold, including:

- Runny or stuffy nose
- Low-grade fever (less than 100.4°F)
- Sneezing
- Mild cough

One to two weeks after the initial symptoms start, people may develop coughing fits, called paroxysms. These coughing fits usually last from one to six weeks but in some cases can last up to ten weeks. The cough generally gets worse and becomes more frequent as the illness progresses over time. Coughing fits may lead to:

- A “whoop” sound
- Vomiting during or after coughing fits
- Problems breathing
- Difficulty sleeping
- Extreme tiredness

Young infants have the highest reported rates of illness, hospitalizations and death from pertussis. Many ill babies won't cough at all and instead may experience **apnea** (life-threatening pauses in breathing) or feeding difficulties. The apnea may cause cyanosis (turning blue around the lips, mouth or tongue) or they may struggle to breathe.

The bacteria that causes pertussis is spread easily from person to person through the air. When a person with pertussis sneezes or coughs, they release small particles containing the bacteria, which then allows other people to breathe it in and become ill. These bacteria can spread when people spend a lot of time together or share breathing space. People are contagious from the start of symptoms and for at least 2 weeks after coughing begins or until appropriate antibiotic treatment is

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completed. Children should be excluded from school, child care, or camp while they are contagious.

The best way to prevent pertussis and severe illness from pertussis is to get vaccinated. Pertussis vaccines work but aren't perfect. People who are up to date on their vaccinations but still get pertussis generally have a milder illness, and many times only experience a cough. Nurses and administrators should know the immunization status of students, campers, and staff members. Encourage participants to know their vaccination status before they attend, and to learn about state-required vaccinations and other vaccines recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), including vaccines for pertussis.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends pertussis vaccination for everyone.

- Five doses of DTaP are recommended for children.
- Adolescents through age 18 should receive one dose of Tdap; preferably at 11-12 years of age.
- Adults 19 years of age or older who have not previously received a dose of Tdap should get vaccinated.
- To provide the best protection to infants, pregnant women should receive Tdap during the 27th through 36th week of each pregnancy.

It's very important to treat pertussis early, before coughing fits begin. Healthcare providers generally treat pertussis with antibiotics as well as provide post-exposure prophylaxis to close contacts. Further treatment in the hospital may be required if symptoms are serious.

The CDC recommends practicing good hygiene to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses like pertussis by encouraging children and adults to:

- Cover mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Put used tissue in the waste basket.
- Cough or sneeze into upper sleeve or elbow, not in their hands, if no tissue is available.
- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Use an alcohol-based hand rub if soap and water are not available.

The NC DPH Communicable Disease Branch continues to monitor pertussis data in the state and will provide additional information if it becomes necessary. If your school, child care or camp happen to see an increase in pertussis among attendees and/or staff, please reach out to the Communicable Disease Branch Epi On Call at (919) 733-3419.

Thank you for your work protecting the health of the children in our community.

Additional Information:

Communicable Disease Branch 24/7 Epi On Call Telephone number: (919) 733-3419

CDC Pertussis Information: <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/about/index.html>

CDC Pertussis Infographic: <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/diseases/child/vpd-infographics/whooping-cough-infographic.pdf>

CDC School Infection Prevention Guidance:

<https://www.cdc.gov/orr/school-preparedness/infection-prevention/index.html>

North Carolina Child Care Health Consultants Communicable Disease Resources:

<https://healthychildcare.unc.edu/resources/communicable-disease-resources/>

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