PERTUSSIS
(Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?
Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a contagious disease involving the lungs and airways. It is caused by a bacterium, *Bordetella pertussis*, that is found in the nose, mouth, and throat of an infected person. More than 100 cases are reported each year in Pennsylvania, mostly in children. Other cases of pertussis occur but are not diagnosed, especially in adults.

Who gets pertussis?
Pertussis can occur at any age.

How do you get pertussis?
People get pertussis by breathing in droplets from the nose and mouth of already infected persons. Older children and adults may have milder disease and may spread the disease to unimmunized infants and young children. An infected person is most contagious at the beginning of the disease. If untreated, an infected person can spread pertussis for up to 3 weeks after coughing starts. Antibiotic treatment limits contagiousness to five days after treatment is started.

How soon do symptoms start?
Symptoms usually start 5 to 10 days after exposure to another person with the disease, but may take as long as 20 days to start.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?
Pertussis begins as a mild illness like the common cold. Sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever, and mild coughing progress to severe coughing. Some persons have episodes of rapid coughing followed by a high-pitched whoop as they take a deep breath. However, not everyone with pertussis has a whoop, especially very young infants. Severe cough may continue for many weeks despite proper treatment. Symptoms may be milder in older children and adults. However, pertussis can be a serious disease, especially in infants and young children. Complications can include pneumonia, dehydration, seizures, encephalopathy (a disorder of the brain), and death.

How is pertussis treated?
Antibiotics such as erythromycin may be useful early in the disease. Antibiotics are particularly helpful in reducing spread of the disease to other persons.
However, once severe symptoms begin, antibiotics may not have any effect on symptoms.