Dear Alice,

I am looking for the best resources on pertussis, for adults and children. My son has a possible diagnosis, but the culture takes weeks for a result. Where can I research supportive care for suspected pertussis?

Answer

Dear Reader,

By reading up on pertussis while waiting for your son's test results, you'll be better able to help him beat the infection if his diagnosis is confirmed. *Bordetella pertussis* is a highly contagious bacterium that causes infection in the respiratory system and uncontrollable coughing fits, also known as whooping cough. Although whooping cough can be particularly dangerous for infants, most people recover successfully with proper treatment. Below you'll find some basic information about the condition in addition to a few referrals to other reliable resources.

Today, most children are immunized against whooping cough with the DTaP vaccine[^2] — a vaccine with protection against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis. A booster shot that includes protection against pertussis, the Tdap vaccine[^3], is also recommended for adolescents between the ages of 11 and 12, adults who didn't receive the booster as an adolescent, health care workers, pregnant women, and any adult in contact with an infant younger than 12 months old. If you're not already immunized, experts estimate that about 80 percent of family members who aren't vaccinated against pertussis will get it if they live in the same place as someone who's infected. Asking your health care provider about whether antibiotics or a booster vaccine would be appropriate for you as a caretaker to prevent spreading the infection might be a good idea.

Whooping cough begins with symptoms characteristic of a common cold, but after about 10 to 12 days symptoms may include:

- Runny nose
- Low grade fever (102 degrees Fahrenheit or lower)
- Severe, repeated cough that can make breathing difficult, induce vomiting, produces a ?whoop? sound when a person breathes in, and cause a short loss of consciousness
- Diarrhea
- Choking spells in infants
Because the symptoms of whooping cough can also be similar to other conditions (such as pneumonia), a lab test is needed to confirm pertussis infection. As you noted, test results can take a while so treatment may be started before the diagnosis is confirmed, especially in infants who are at higher risk for complications.

If your son is not receiving treatment yet, you may want to ask his pediatrician or other health care provider about starting antibiotics such as erythromycin. These medications can help symptoms clear sooner and stop the infection from spreading to others. The following are recommended remedies for anyone recuperating from whooping cough at home:

- **Rest.** Keep the bedroom cool, quiet, and dark so the sick person can get extra shut-eye.
- **Stay hydrated.** Drink plenty of fluids like water, juice, and soups. Watch out for signs of dehydration in children such as chapped lips, crying without tears, and infrequent urination.
- **Break out the humidifier.** Moist air is gentler on irritated lungs and helps to break up respiratory mucus. A warm shower or steamy bath also works.
- **Clear the air.** Irritants like cigarette smoke or fireplace fumes can trigger coughing spells.
- **Cover that cough.** Keep tissues handy or cough into your elbow or sleeve.
- **Wash your hands.** This goes for everyone near the person who is ill. Frequent hand washing with soap and warm water is one of the best ways to keep pertussis and other germs from spreading.
- **Pass on the cough medicine.** Though antibiotics may be prescribed, over-the-counter cough medicines are not considered helpful or strong enough to calm a coughing fit and are not recommended.

Since young children (especially those under 18 months old) with pertussis may stop breathing during coughing spells, they require close and constant monitoring. Babies under six months are usually treated in the hospital. If your son is admitted to the hospital, he might receive antibiotics to treat the infection, sedative medicines, an oxygen tent with humidity if he has trouble breathing, or intravenous (IV) fluids if he’s dehydrated or cannot eat enough. Although a hospital stay may sound scary, most recover well from whooping cough after proper treatment.

For more information about pertussis infection and treatments for whooping cough, check out the websites listed above. If it turns out that your son has whooping cough, being informed may ease your worries and help you care for him. Hopefully, your will son will make a speedy recovery!
Related questions

Allergic to one vaccine, allergic to all? [10]
Handwashing do's and don'ts [11]
Cold won't go away [12]
Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) [13]
Bronchitis: causes and effects? [14]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [15]
Medical Services (CUMC) [16]
Published date:
Sep 25, 2009
Last reviewed on:
Dec 19, 2014

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/whooping-cough-pertussis-care

Links