Pertussis (Whooping Cough)
An illness requiring droplet precautions

What is pertussis?
Pertussis is a disease caused by a bacterium called *Bordetella pertussis*. It is a highly communicable, vaccine-preventable disease that lasts for many weeks. Up to 90% of susceptible people exposed in an infected household develop the disease. Adults and adolescents are at risk because their childhood immunization may no longer be protective. Recently, vaccines have been developed that are targeted to protect older age groups from acquiring the disease.

Pertussis is a reportable disease. The health department is notified when a case is diagnosed so that post-exposure antibiotics can be given to protect others who may have come in contact with you and are at risk of becoming ill.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?
In children, symptoms are usually:
- Spasms of severe coughing with deep, noisy sounds when a breath is taken.
- Vomiting.

In adults, the symptoms are usually less severe.

What are the complications of a pertussis infection?
Major complications are most common among infants and young children and include hypoxia (not enough oxygen reaches the body’s tissues), apnea, pneumonia, seizures, encephalopathy (diseases of the brain), and malnutrition.

How is pertussis spread?
The disease is spread through direct contact with discharges (droplets) from respiratory mucus membranes of infected persons, particularly when they are coughing.
To protect others, persons with symptoms should practice “respiratory hygiene” by wearing a mask, washing their hands often, and disposing of tissues in wastebaskets when coming into a healthcare facility. Free “Cover Your Cough Kits” are available at the Information Desk and at clinic intake areas.

Please tell your healthcare provider if you think you have pertussis or think that you have been exposed to pertussis.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider can usually diagnose pertussis by clinical symptoms. For confirmation, a respiratory sample is sent to the laboratory.

How are others protected from pertussis at the medical center?

At University of Washington Medical Center, we place a “Droplet Precautions” sign near the doorway of your room to alert healthcare workers, caregivers, and your visitors to observe expanded precautions when visiting or caring for you to protect them from “catching” the disease.

What does it mean to be in droplet precautions?

Healthcare workers and caregivers wear masks, gowns, and gloves when providing care.

Visitors are at risk of acquiring pertussis and should also wear the protective gear.

Hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gels, and environmental cleanliness are emphasized.

You will be asked to stay in your room unless you need to go to other departments in the hospital for treatment. If you leave your room, you will be asked to wash your hands and to wear a yellow gown, gloves, and a mask.

Please do not use the nutrition rooms while you are “in isolation.” When you want a snack or ice water, ask a member of your healthcare team to bring it to you.

When can the precautions be stopped?

Droplet precautions for pertussis may be stopped 24 hours after you have completed your course of antibiotics.