Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Whooping cough is very contagious and can cause severe irritation of the nasopharyx (where the nasal passages meet the back of the throat). This irritation leads to periods of coughing that occur in distinct three stages and can last several months.

Stage 1: Cold-like symptoms with sneezing and runny nose and mild cough. The person sometimes can have a mild fever. This is the most contagious stage and usually last from a few days to 2 weeks.

Stage 2: Cold symptoms improve, but cough worsens. It changes from a dry, hacking cough to one that may occur as uncontrollable and possibly violent burst. This is the most serious stage and can last from 2 to 4 weeks. The constricted airways lend themselves to a whooping noise when the affected person attempts to take in a breath after a coughing spell. This is caused by the restricted airway. Often the individual will vomit following a coughing spell. Between episodes of coughing, the individual may appear normal.

Stage 3: The individual improves and regains strength; however the cough persists for weeks to months. It can be aggravated by cold air or another respiratory illness.

The incubation period is from 7 to 14 days after exposure. Immunization is key to prevention. Adult caregivers may contract the disease and unknowingly expose children in their care. Young children, babies and the elderly are more at risk of serious side effects such as pneumonia.

Prevention: One of the best preventions is good hand washing and being sure to keep children away from those with a bad cough. Contact your healthcare provider to verify you and your children have been immunized or call the Wilson County Health Department at 252-237-3141 for immunization information.