

Podcast Title: “When the Cough Won’t Stop: A Parent’s Guide to Whooping Cough”

[Soft intro music fades in]

HOST:

Welcome back to *A Parent’s Guide*. Thanks for joining us. Today we’re talking about pertussis, also known as whooping cough. The episode is called “*When the Cough Won’t Stop*,” and we’re going to walk through what experts from the Mayo Clinic and the American Academy of Pediatrics say about whooping cough—what it is, what it looks like, and what you can do if it shows up in your home, particularly with very young children.

And I’m not doing this alone. Joining me today is Dr. Elena Ramirez, a board-certified pediatrician and longtime advocate for children’s health. Dr. Ramirez, thank you so much for being here.

DR. RAMIREZ:

Thank you for having me. I’m always grateful for any chance to help parents feel more informed and less alone.

[Music fades out]

SEGMENT 1 — Understanding Whooping Cough

HOST:

Let’s start with the basics. Pertussis is a bacterial infection that affects the lungs and airways. The Mayo Clinic explains that symptoms usually don’t appear for 5 to 10 days after infection. Early symptoms look a lot like a regular cold—runny nose, mild fever, maybe a little congestion.

But then the cough arrives, usually within a week or two. And it’s not a normal cough. The AAP describes pertussis as causing bursts of “intense coughs,” followed by what the Mayo Clinic describes as a “high-pitched noise that sounds like a ‘whoop.’” The Mayo Clinic adds that these coughing fits “may end with vomiting or exhaustion,” especially in young children.

We heard from a new mom who said, “*I’ve vaccinated my baby, but I’m anxious because so many people around me aren’t. Does that put my child at risk?*”

DR. RAMIREZ:

It’s a very understandable worry. Pertussis spreads easily—Mayo Clinic notes it “spreads easily from person to person” through droplets in the air. So when vaccination rates drop in a community, the infection has more opportunities to circulate.

While vaccines for prevention are the best course of action, your healthcare provider may recommend antibiotics if you or your child has been around someone with the infection, and be sure to keep your child home from daycare or group gatherings if they do get sick. Reach out to your healthcare provider as questions come up, and keep getting those vaccinations on schedule, full dosage is one of the best protections against infection (Mayo Clinic).

HOST:

Another parent asked, *“How do I know if this is whooping cough or just a cold?”*

DR. RAMIREZ:

Parents shouldn't feel like they have to diagnose this alone. If a cough is severe, persistent, or causing color changes, like getting red or blue in the face from straining, or breathing trouble, that's a good time to reach out to a healthcare provider.

SEGMENT 2 — What to Do If Your Child Gets It

HOST:

So let's say a child *does* have whooping cough. What happens next?

DR. RAMIREZ:

The first step is contacting your child's healthcare provider. Pertussis needs medical attention. The Mayo Clinic explains that antibiotics “can help reduce the severity of the infection” when started early. But even with treatment, the cough can last for weeks.

HOST:

A soon-to-be dad asked, *“I'm terrified of not knowing what to do in an emergency. What's the first step?”*

DR. RAMIREZ:

The first step is exactly what he's doing: learning and preparing. And if a baby is under a year old or having trouble breathing, a health professional may recommend hospitalization. The Mayo Clinic points out that infants “are at greatest risk of complications,” so they often need closer monitoring.

HOST:

And at home?

DR. RAMIREZ:

Comfort, hydration, and rest. The Mayo Clinic recommends “resting in a quiet, calm environment” to help reduce coughing fits. And keeping the child away from others helps prevent it from spreading to others.

SEGMENT 3 — Vaccinated vs. Unvaccinated: What's the Difference?

HOST:

Let's talk about vaccines, because this came up a lot. Right now, there's a lot of tension about the topic. The pandemic really got some people concerned about the effectiveness and safety of vaccines.

DR. RAMIREZ:

Absolutely. If a child is vaccinated, their symptoms are often milder. The AAP says vaccination "reduces the severity of disease," and the Mayo Clinic adds that vaccinated individuals "often have a milder illness" if they do get whooping cough. If you're concerned about vaccines, health professionals and sources like the Mayo clinic can help assure you about vaccines.

HOST:

On that note, we also heard from a soon-to-be grandmother who said, *"I'm skeptical about vaccines after everything that happened during the pandemic. I don't want to put anything dangerous into my body, but I also don't want to endanger my grandchild."*

DR. RAMIREZ:

That's a very human place to be—caught between fear and love. Many people are still processing the last few years. Talking with a trusted healthcare provider can help you understand what's recommended for adults who will be around newborns. Following simple hygiene procedures can also help you keep others safe: wash your hands often and stay home and away from others, especially small children, when you don't feel well.

HOST:

And for kids who haven't been vaccinated or haven't finished the series?

DR. RAMIREZ:

They're more vulnerable to severe symptoms, but recovery is still possible. And there's still time to work with a pediatrician on next steps. They may recommend antibiotics or hospitalization, so be sure to communicate with your pediatrician when your child is unwell.

SEGMENT 4 — Should You Still Vaccinate After Recovery?

HOST:

One of the biggest questions we got was:

"If my child gets whooping cough, do they still need the vaccine later?"

DR. RAMIREZ:

Yes. Public health guidance encourages completing the vaccine series. The Mayo Clinic explains that immunity after infection “isn’t lifelong,” so vaccination still plays an important role in long-term protection. It’s recommended to continue the DTaP vaccine series, and then to get the Tdap vaccine at 11 or 12, during the third trimester of pregnancy, and every 10 years as an adult.

HOST:

So it’s about protecting them down the road.

DR. RAMIREZ:

Exactly, and protecting the vulnerable kids around them.

SEGMENT 5 — A Message for Worried Parents

HOST:

If you’re listening to this while holding a coughing baby, pacing the floor, or sitting in a waiting room, I want you to hear this: you’re doing everything you can.

One parent wrote, *“My baby is only 6 months old and unvaccinated. I feel guilty and terrified now that they’re sick. Is there still hope?”*

DR. RAMIREZ:

There is always hope. Whooping cough is frightening, but it’s treatable. Contact your health care provider as soon as possible for treatment recommendations. And there are programs that help families access vaccines if cost is a concern.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

HOST:

Dr. Ramirez, thank you so much for being here today.

DR. RAMIREZ:

Thank you for having me. And to all the parents listening—you’re doing an incredible job.

HOST:

For more information, check the CDC’s website or talk to your pediatrician. You’re not failing. Being a concerned parent means you’re stronger than you think.

[Soft outro music fades in]

Take care of yourselves and those little lungs.

[Music fades out completely]