

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a serious infection of the breathing system. It is caused by bacteria that get into the throat and lungs. Pertussis is very contagious – it spreads easily from one person to another. People of all ages can get sick.

How does pertussis spread?

- When an infected person coughs or sneezes and the germs get in the nose or mouth of a person who is close by.
- By touching fluids from the mouth or nose of a person who has pertussis.
- By touching a surface or objects that a person with pertussis has handled and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.

The pertussis bacteria can live for two to five days on dry objects such as clothing, glass, or paper. A person can spread the disease from the beginning of their sickness and for at least two weeks after the coughing begins. Pertussis usually spreads between family members in the same house, or other situations where there is close contact between people.

Anyone who has not been vaccinated against pertussis can get sick.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Early symptoms are mild, like the common cold, and include:

- Runny nose or nasal congestion
- Sneezing
- Mild cough
- Fever

The cough usually gets worse after one to two weeks. Severe coughing spells may cause:

- Thick, clear phlegm (mucous) to be brought up
- A loud whooping sound when breathing in
- Vomiting or trouble breathing.
- The cough can last for weeks to months and may be worse at night.

Who is most at risk for complications from pertussis?

Pertussis is most serious in young children, especially those under one year of age. In this age group, complications may include pneumonia (an infection of the lungs), convulsions or seizures, brain damage, and occasionally death.

Women with child who get pertussis in their third trimester are at risk of pre-term labour (having their baby early).

How is pertussis treated?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics. This medication will not cure the cough but will prevent the spread of disease to others. After five days of antibiotics the person with pertussis can no longer spread the disease even though they may still have a cough.

In some cases, antibiotics may also be advised for close contacts of a person who has pertussis. This may include people living in the same house, infants less than one year of age, and women with child in their third trimester.

People with pertussis should avoid contact with children, especially babies, and women with child in their third trimester until five days after antibiotic treatment has begun.

How can I prevent pertussis?

You can protect yourself and your children against pertussis with a safe and effective vaccine. The vaccine is free in Ontario. It is given at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age, 4 to 6 years of age, 14 to 16 years of age, and in adulthood.

You can reduce the spread of illness by:

- Washing hands frequently with soap and water or using alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- Covering coughs and sneezes
- Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces like counters and doorknobs
- Staying home when sick.

What should I do?

- If you or a family member experience symptom of pertussis, seek medical attention. Let your doctor or nurse practitioner's office know before you arrive that you or your child may have pertussis, so they can prepare for your visit.
- Tell your doctor or nurse practitioner if you have been in contact with someone who has pertussis.

For more information

Call Southwestern Public Health at 1-800-922-0096.