



THE FACTS: Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is It?

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is an infection caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. The disease causes severe spells of coughing. Although people of all ages may get this infection, it is most severe in infants less than one year of age. Many infants become so sick that they have to be hospitalized. Pertussis can be prevented with a vaccine. The vaccine will prevent disease in about 60-80% of children and reduce the severity in others.

What are the Signs and Symptoms?

The infection usually begins with a runny nose and irritating cough. Soon, the cough becomes more frequent and severe. The cough may end in gagging, vomiting or trouble breathing. Sometimes after a coughing attack, the child may give a loud whoop when breathing in, which is why the infection is called "whooping cough". The "whooping" symptom does not usually occur in adults; however, coughing attacks in older groups are particularly troublesome at night resulting in extreme fatigue from sleep-loss. It takes a long time for children and adults to get over pertussis as coughing may persist for 1-2 months or longer. Laboratory testing to confirm pertussis is available through your health care provider.

How Does it Spread?

Pertussis spreads very easily from person to person in the same household or childcare centre. The germs spread by direct contact with discharges from the nose/mouth of an infected person or through the air when a person coughs. People with pertussis can spread germs from the time they have the first symptom (runny nose and cough) until three weeks after the coughing attack starts. It takes 1 to 3 weeks to become sick with pertussis after coming into contact with someone who has it.

Things Parents Can Do

- Check your child's immunization record to see if his/her vaccines are up to date. The vaccine is given at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months, 4 – 6 years and again in high school between 14 and 16 years.
- Know the signs of pertussis. If a case is found in your child's school/daycare, watch your child for symptoms. If your child develops symptoms, have your child examined by a doctor.
- If your child has pertussis, he/she should not return to school/daycare until the antibiotic has been taken for 5 days. If no treatment is taken, your child must be excluded for three weeks from the start of the illness – the infectious period if no treatment is given.

Contacts of Pertussis

- If a child or adult has pertussis, all close household contacts may need to start on a course of antibiotics regardless of age or immunization history. This may help to stop the contact from developing the disease or make the disease less severe. It will also ensure that the contact does not spread the infection to others. Highest priority is given to contacts who are infants under 1 year of age and pregnant women in their 3rd trimester. Antibiotics are unlikely to be of any benefit after 21 days from first contact with an infected person with pertussis.

**For Further Information Contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318
or toll free 1-888-294-6630, ext. 8318.**

