

Pertussis Fact Sheet

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is Pertussis?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a serious, sometimes fatal, respiratory infection caused by the bacterium, *Bordetella pertussis*. It is very contagious and one of the most common vaccine-preventable diseases. World-wide pertussis is responsible for about 300,000 deaths in children annually.

In most cases the disease usually begins with cold-like symptoms including runny nose or congestion, sneezing, and mild cough or fever. After one to two weeks, the disease progresses to severe coughing spells with a loud “whooping” sound while inhaling. Coughing spells may end in vomiting. Pertussis can occur in individuals of all ages, but is most severe in the very young, especially those less than one year of age. Older children and adults may have a prolonged cough without the “whoop” or vomiting.

Pertussis is unlike many other diseases. Although pertussis infection usually results in prolonged immunity, repeat infections can occur. The most effective way to be protected against pertussis is through immunization.

What are the complications of Pertussis?

Complications among adolescents and adults include fainting, interruptions in sleep, rib fractures and pneumonia. Complications among infants include pneumonia, seizures, inflammation of the brain and permanent brain damage. Around one in every 250 children under six months of age who contract pertussis will die. The most common cause of death is from pertussis pneumonia.

How is the disease spread?

People with pertussis spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in direct or close contact with others, who then breathe in the droplets carrying pertussis bacteria.

Many infants who get pertussis are infected by older siblings or parents who might not even know they have the disease.

Symptoms can take seven to 21 days to develop after contact with an infected person. The incubation period is commonly seven to 10 days and not more than 21 days. A person with pertussis can infect others from seven days after they have been exposed to pertussis to three weeks after the onset of violent coughing.

Children should be excluded from child care facilities until they are well and until five days after starting antibiotic treatment.

What should be done when someone has pertussis, or if pertussis is suspected?

If pertussis is suspected, contact your health care provider or your local public health unit. Since pertussis is a reportable disease, local public health units monitor all cases and contacts of pertussis. A person infected with pertussis should stay home and avoid pregnant women and infants (less than 12 months) until they have received at least five days of the 7-day course of antibiotics. Close contacts should have their immunization status

reviewed and updated by their health care practitioner.

How is pertussis treated?

A person with pertussis is usually given a course of antibiotics. In some cases, antibiotics may also be advised for close contacts of someone who has pertussis. This may include people living in the same house, if there is an infant less than one year of age or a pregnant woman in the 3rd trimester. The treatment usually takes seven days.

How is pertussis prevented?

The best way to prevent pertussis is to get immunized. In Ontario, two kinds of combination vaccines are publicly funded.

DTaP-IPV, for children less than seven years old, provides safe protection against diphtheria, tetanus, polio and pertussis diseases when given in the appropriate number of doses. Children should receive five doses of the combination vaccine by the time they are four to six years old at two, four, six and 18 months and one dose before entering school.

Tdap provides safe protection against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis. The vaccine is publicly funded for adolescents 14 to 16 years of age (booster dose) and for unimmunized children seven to 17 years of age (as a three-dose series).

Adults who are properly immunized against pertussis will not only protect themselves, but also help to protect children who are much more likely to experience complications from the disease. Pertussis immunization for adults is not publicly funded.

Your health care provider will know which vaccine and how many doses are right for you and your family members.

In addition to immunization, infections like pertussis can be minimized or prevented by practicing good hand hygiene (washing your hands properly and with soap), and covering your nose and mouth with your upper arm or a tissue when coughing or sneezing.

Is the pertussis vaccine safe?

The vaccine is safe. Side effects are usually mild and may include soreness, swelling and redness at the spot where the needle was given. Some people may get a mild fever, body aches, and feel tired for a day or two after the immunization.

Serious allergic reactions, though rare, may occur with any vaccine or drug. Serious reactions should be reported to your local public health unit or health care provider.

The benefits of protection against disease significantly outweigh any risk from the vaccine.

For more information, contact your health care provider or your local public health department. For a listing of Ontario health units, visit: http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/contact/phu/phuloc_mn.html