

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

## What is Pertussis?

Pertussis, commonly called whooping cough, gets its name from the high pitched gasp or whooping sound a person makes when trying to breathe after having a coughing spell.

Pertussis is a respiratory infection (e.g. nose, throat, lungs) that is caused by bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. It is very contagious and spreads easily.

## Who is at risk of serious complications from Pertussis?

Pertussis (whooping cough) can cause serious complications in infants under 1 year of age and pregnant women in their third trimester.

Pregnant women in their third trimester are not at increased risk themselves, but they do risk transmitting or spreading bacteria that cause pertussis to their newborns during delivery.

## How is Pertussis spread?

Pertussis spreads through direct contact between people. Someone with pertussis (whooping cough) may cough or sneeze and spread droplets in the air that contain many pertussis bacteria. These droplets may land in the nose or throat of another person when they breathe in and cause them to get sick.

Someone with pertussis can spread the bacteria to others:

- During the two weeks BEFORE the coughing spells start
- During the three weeks AFTER the coughing spells start

A sick person is no longer contagious after taking antibiotics for 5 days.

## What are the symptoms of Pertussis?

In the beginning, pertussis (whooping cough) looks like a common cold with a runny nose, a dry cough, a mild fever and sneezing.

After a week or two, the symptoms may get worse and usually include:

- Severe coughing spells that bring up thick mucous (phlegm)
- Vomiting can happen after a child has a severe coughing spell
- Coughing spells that end with a high-pitched whoop sound as a person gasps for air
- Feeling tired and worn out from coughing

In adults, the symptoms of pertussis may look like bronchitis. Infants under 6 months of age, vaccinated children, teenagers and adults may not whoop at all, or may not whoop as loudly as older, unvaccinated children do when they are sick.

## When do symptoms appear?

It can take 6 to 20 days for symptoms to appear when someone has been around the bacteria which cause pertussis (whooping cough).

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### **How can the spread of Pertussis be prevented?**

Get vaccinated! Pertussis immunization is part of Ontario's publicly funded vaccine program.

- Infants should get vaccines containing protection against pertussis at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age.
- Children should get a booster dose between 4-6 years of age and another between 14-16 years of age.
- Adults 18 years and older can replace one of their 10 year boosters with a vaccine that contains protection against pertussis.
- Pregnant women, after 26 weeks of pregnancy, should get immunized if they have not received a vaccine containing protection against pertussis as an adult.

### **Can Pertussis be treated?**

Pertussis (whooping cough) can be treated with antibiotics. The antibiotics may not cure all the symptoms right away, but will stop a person from being contagious after taking antibiotics for 5 days.

### **Should I see a health care provider?**

Call your healthcare provider before going to his or her office. Let them know that you think you or your family member might have pertussis (whooping cough). This will let the healthcare provider prepare for your visit and protect other patients.

### **I had Pertussis as a child. Can I get it again?**

Many experts believe that adults can get pertussis (whooping cough) again if they have had it as a child because their immunity or protection decreases over 5 to 15 years. Because of this, a booster vaccine is recommended for adults so it's important to talk to your health care provider.

**For further information contact the Infectious Disease Program at  
625-8318 or toll free 1-888-294-6630 ex. 8318**