



Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious infection of the respiratory tract caused by a bacterium called *Bordetella pertussis*. The disease can affect people of any age; however, is most severe in young infants. Pregnant women in their third trimester and infants under one year of age are most vulnerable to the effects of pertussis. In some cases, pertussis can cause serious complications and even death in infants.

What are the symptoms?

Pertussis starts like a common cold with symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose, mild fever and a mild cough. Over the next two weeks, the cough gets worse, leading to severe, repeated, and forceful coughing spells that often end with a whooping sound before the next breath. The cough of pertussis can last several months and occurs more often at night. The cough can make a person gag or spit out mucous, and make it hard to take a breath. Babies and young children may turn blue as their breathing could be interrupted by the coughing.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is spread through droplets in the air from an infected person's coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread through coming in contact with discharges from an infected person's nose or throat. Adults with mild disease are often the source of infection for young infants living in the same household.

When do symptoms start?

Symptoms may appear between seven to ten days after exposure to an infected person, but these symptoms may be delayed for up to 21 days.

How long are people infectious?

Pertussis is most contagious during the first two weeks when symptoms resemble those of a common cold. Contagiousness declines rapidly after that, but may last up to three weeks. Patients are no longer infectious after five days of treatment with an antibiotic.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Immunization is the best available protection against the disease. A child under seven years needs five doses of the pertussis vaccine, starting at two months of age, to be fully immunized. An additional dose of the pertussis vaccine combined with tetanus and diphtheria (Tdap) vaccine, is given to adolescents in Grade 9 in Newfoundland and Labrador. You should see your health care provider if anyone in your household has a cough that lasts longer than a week. It is important to get an accurate diagnosis, and to make sure infected individuals get treatment and avoid close contact with young children.

What is the treatment?

Persons with pertussis will be prescribed an antibiotic. It is important to finish taking the antibiotic. An infected individual should stay home and avoid close contact with others until five days after the start of the antibiotic. Other things to do to relieve the symptoms include:

- Resting as much as possible;
- Drinking plenty of fluids;
- Eating small, frequent meals (may decrease vomiting); and,
- Elevating the head of the bed

Do not give cough medicines, they will not help. A public health nurse will provide advice for follow-up of individuals with pertussis.

Does pertussis require hospitalization?

Usually pertussis can be managed at home. If severe symptoms develop, an infant or young child will require treatment in hospital. Go to an Emergency Room if:

- Your child's lips or skin turn blue during a coughing spell;
- Your child is having difficulty breathing, especially between coughing episodes;
- Seizures occur; and
- High fever develops during the illness.

If you require further information, contact your local public health nurse.