



Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis (Whooping Cough)?

Whooping cough is the common name for pertussis, a very contagious infection of the lungs and airways. One of the main symptoms is to have severe coughing spells. The disease gets its common name from the "whoop" sound people often make as they try to catch their breath after one of these coughing spells.

The disease is most serious in young children, especially those under one year of age. In this age group, pertussis may lead to pneumonia, seizures, brain damage, and occasionally death.

How do you get pertussis?

The bacteria that cause pertussis are spread in the following ways:

- Through droplets in the air when people who have pertussis cough or sneeze
- By touching fluids from the mouth or nose of a person who has pertussis
- By touching objects handled by a person who has pertussis

What are the symptoms?

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

- Runny nose
- Sneezing
- Mild fever
- Nasal congestion
- Dry cough

Symptoms may worsen after one to two weeks and may include:

- Severe coughing attacks that may bring up thick, clear phlegm (mucous)
- Vomiting or loss of breath may occur after a child has a severe coughing attack
- Coughing attacks that end with a high-pitched whoop sound as a person gasps for air
- Fatigue from coughing so much

In adults, the symptoms of pertussis may resemble those of bronchitis. Infants under 6 months of age, vaccinated children, teenagers, and adults may not whoop at all.

The cough can last for weeks to months and may be worse at night. Treatment with antibiotics will not stop the cough, but will kill the bacteria that allow the disease to spread to others.

When do symptoms start?

Symptoms usually appear between nine to 10 days after exposure to an infected person, but may develop anywhere between six and 20 days.

How long can the disease spread?

Pertussis can be spread during the first three weeks of coughing.

People are no longer infectious after five days of antibiotics.

How is pertussis treated?

Persons with pertussis may be prescribed antibiotics. Until a treatment is complete, an infected individual should stay home and avoid close contact with others, especially infants and young children, and pregnant women in their last trimester.

How can pertussis be prevented?

Immunization is the best way to prevent the spread of pertussis. Talk to your health care provider to make sure you and your child are up to date with your immunizations.

Where can I get more information?

- Call the Perth District Health Unit's Health Line at 519-271-7600 ext. 267. Toll-free at 1-877-271-7348 ext. 267.
- Visit www.pdhu.on.ca