

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Pertussis commonly known as whooping cough is a respiratory illness caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*.

## What are the Symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis usually begins with cold-like symptoms including a runny nose, congestion, sneezing, mild cough and fever. After 1 or 2 weeks, the cough becomes more frequent and severe and a loud “whooping” sound may be heard when a person inhales. In infants younger than 6 months, the whoop is often absent.

Coughing spells can last 1 to 2 months and are often followed by vomiting. Pertussis is most severe when it occurs during the first 6 months of age. Complications of pertussis may include sleep disturbances, rib fractures, pneumonia, seizures, inflammation of the brain and permanent brain damage.

## Pertussis vaccination

The best way to prevent pertussis is through vaccination. In Ontario, immunization against pertussis is routinely done using a combination vaccine.

- Four doses of a combined vaccine containing diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio and Hib is given to infants at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age.
- A booster dose of diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis and polio is given at 4 to 6 years.
- Adolescents require a booster dose of diphtheria combined with tetanus and pertussis at 14 to 16 years of age.
- It is recommended that adults over the age of 19 who did not receive a pertussis booster in their teens, receive a one-time dose of combined tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis vaccine.

## How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is a very contagious disease found only in humans. The pertussis germ is carried in the nose and throat. People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria.

Teenagers and adults are often responsible for infecting infants. The illness can be much more severe in infants under one year of age. If you are not protected against pertussis through vaccination, you can become ill.

## Complications of pertussis

Pertussis can cause serious complications, including brain damage, seizures and death.

## More to know

- Make sure your immunization record is up to date.
- Wash your hands often using soap and water or an alcohol based hand rub. Cough and sneeze into your sleeve or a tissue, not your hands.
- Know the signs of pertussis, seek medical attention if you develop symptoms.
- A person infected with pertussis should stay home and avoid pregnant women and infants less than 12 months of age until they have received at least five days of antibiotic treatment.
- Children should be excluded from child care facilities until they are well and have received at least 5 days of antibiotic treatment.



**Northwestern  
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