



Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a serious infection of the lungs and throat caused by pertussis bacteria (germs).

People of any age can get pertussis. Young children who have not been immunized get more sick than older children and adults.

Pertussis can cause complications such as pneumonia, convulsions, brain damage or even death. These complications happen most often in infants. Each year in Canada, 1 to 3 deaths occur due to pertussis.

Complications of pertussis include:

- Apnea (stopping breathing)
- Pneumonia
- Convulsions or seizures
- Encephalopathy or brain damage.

Pertussis Vaccine

The pertussis vaccine provides protection against pertussis and is part of the routine childhood immunization program.

Protection from the vaccine decreases after several years. A vaccine for youth and adults is available. Ask your public health nurse or doctor for more information about this vaccine.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis spreads easily when an infected person coughs, sneezes or has close contact

with others. Sharing food, drinks or cigarettes, or kissing someone who has the pertussis bacteria can also put you at risk.

A person with pertussis who does not get treatment can spread the germ to others for up to three weeks after the cough starts.

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 week or two, the cough gets worse, leading to severe coughing spells that often end with a whooping sound before the next breath. This cough can last a month or two 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 less than six months old, teenagers, and adults may not make the whooping sound. Therefore, anyone who has a cough that lasts more than one week should see a doctor.

Is there a treatment?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics, which help reduce the spread of infection and the duration of illness if given during the very early stage of the illness.

People at high risk of serious illness who are in close contact with someone with pertussis are given an antibiotic to prevent the disease. This includes infants less than one year old and pregnant women in the last three months of pregnancy, as well as all of their household and daycare contacts.

People who have or may have pertussis should not have contact with babies or young children until they have been properly tested and/or treated for pertussis.

If you have been in contact with a person who has pertussis, you should call your doctor or local health unit for more information.

Home Treatment

After seeing a doctor, the following home treatment tips may help you to be more comfortable while you rest and recover.

- Stay quiet and calm to help prevent the coughing spells.
- Avoid smoke, dust, sudden noises, lights, and other unnecessary stimulation that may trigger coughing spells.

- Have frequent small drinks of fluid, and make sure to get enough to eat, as coughing requires a lot of energy.
- If humidity helps ease coughing spells, use a cool mist humidifier in the room. If humidity worsens the cough, avoid it. Dry, hot, or polluted air may worsen coughing spells.

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