

Pertussis (whooping cough)

What is pertussis?

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

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

Pertussis can cause complications such as pneumonia, seizures, brain damage or even death. These complications happen often in infants under one year of age. Each year in Canada, 1 to 4 deaths occur due to pertussis, mostly in infants who are too young to be immunized or children who are not fully immunized.

What is the pertussis vaccine?

There are several pertussis vaccines available in B.C. that protect against pertussis. The pertussis vaccines are provided in combination with other vaccines, such as diphtheria, polio and tetanus and are free as part of your child's routine immunizations. It is important that your child is immunized on time, starting at 2 months of age, as the first dose of pertussis vaccine is very effective at preventing deaths from pertussis in infants.

A pertussis vaccine is also available for older children and adults. A booster dose of pertussis vaccine is provided free to grade 9 students in B.C. Adults who were not immunized against pertussis as children can also get a dose of the vaccine for free.

The pertussis vaccine is recommended and provided free to pregnant people in every pregnancy. The vaccine should be given at 27-32 weeks of pregnancy regardless of previous immunization history but may be

given as early as 13 weeks and up until delivery.

A booster dose of the pertussis vaccine is recommended for adults who were immunized in childhood but is not provided for free in B.C. Adults who want to get the vaccine can buy it at most pharmacies and travel clinics.

During an outbreak of pertussis or when traveling overseas, the pertussis vaccine may be given to babies at an earlier age, starting at 6 weeks of age instead of 8 weeks.

For more information about pertussis vaccines, please visit the following:

- [HealthLinkBC File #18c Tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis \(Tdap\) vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #105 Diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, hepatitis B, polio and Haemophilus influenzae type b \(DTaP-HB-IPV-Hib\) vaccine](#)

How does 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. Pertussis can be spread to others during the early stages of the infection when symptoms are not severe. If left untreated, pertussis can spread up to 3 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 2 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 pertussis cough 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 breathe. In babies, pertussis can cause periods of apnea in which their breathing is interrupted.

Babies less than 6 months old, immunized children, teenagers, and adults may not make the whooping sound. Therefore, anyone that could have been exposed to pertussis and has a cough that lasts more than one week should see a health care provider.

Is there a treatment?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics. If taken during the early stages of your illness, the antibiotics help reduce the spread of infection and the length of illness.

Antibiotics may be recommended for close contacts of someone with pertussis to prevent disease. This is especially important for contacts who are infants less than one year of age and pregnant people in their third trimester as they are at high risk of serious illness. Antibiotics are also recommended for household and child care contacts of those as

high risk of serious illness. People who have or may have pertussis should not have contact with others, especially babies, young children, and pregnant people in their third trimester, 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 health care provider for more information.

What is the home treatment?

After seeing a health care provider, the following home treatment tips may help you to be more comfortable while you rest and recover:

- Stay quiet and calm to help prevent coughing
- Avoid smoke, dust, sudden noises, lights, and other unnecessary stimulation that may trigger coughing
- 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, use a cool mist humidifier in the room. If humidity worsens the cough, avoid it. Dry, hot, or polluted air may worsen coughing



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