

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

## What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis (whooping cough) is an infection caused by bacteria. Symptoms include the following:

- Begins with a runny nose and cough
- Soon the cough becomes “paroxysmal” with frequent severe coughing spells, often worse at night. Fever is usually absent or minimal
- A loud “whoop” is often heard when breathing in after coughing. Infants and adults who get whooping cough often don’t have the “whoop” when they cough
- Gagging, turning blue in the face or vomiting after coughing is common
- During the recovery period, the cough often continues for 6-10 weeks

## Who is at highest risk of getting very sick?

Pertussis is most severe in infants less than one year of age. Babies are at much higher risk of severe complications such as apnea spells (periods where they stop breathing) and pneumonia. Hospital care is often needed. Pregnant women in the last three months of their pregnancy are also high risk because they can pass the infection on to their newborn baby if they are coughing after the baby is born.

## How does pertussis spread?

Pertussis spreads easily from person to person through coughing or sneezing. After coming in to contact with someone who has pertussis, it takes 7-21 days to become ill. People can spread the germs from the time they get the infection until three weeks after the coughing spells start. People who take antibiotic medication for pertussis are no longer contagious after five days, even if they are still coughing. A person would be considered exposed if they shared the same air space for more than one hour or had face to face contact with a person who is contagious with pertussis.

## How can I prevent my children and family from getting pertussis?

Immunization is the best way to prevent pertussis. The vaccine is very safe and works well. The vaccine series is given as part of routine immunization for babies starting at two months of age. A booster is given before starting school and then again for teenagers and adults. It is never too late to receive pertussis vaccine. It is recommended for all family members.

This vaccine is particularly important for adults who have or anticipate having close contact with an infant under age 12 months (e.g., women planning a pregnancy, parents, grandparents, child-care providers and health care providers). All pregnant women should get the vaccine (Tdap) for each pregnancy. This vaccine is safe at any time during pregnancy. It is best given between 27 and 32 weeks of pregnancy to provide the best protection for the infant by passing on antibodies from the mother during pregnancy before the baby is born.

### Pertussis Vaccine Schedule

- 2,4,6 and 18 months
- 4-6 years
- 14-16 years – booster
- Adults – one booster at 18 years or older
- Pregnant women - best between 27 and 32 weeks gestation for every pregnancy

## How is pertussis treated?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics such as azithromycin, clarithromycin or erythromycin. The medication helps prevent the infection from spreading to others and may help the cough get better, especially if started early. The cough usually continues for weeks or months despite effective antibiotics. High risk persons who have been exposed to pertussis (infants under one year of age or pregnant women in the last three months of pregnancy), should take antibiotics to prevent them from getting sick.

## Who should have preventative antibiotics?

Antibiotics are recommended as a preventative measure for certain people who have been in recent contact with someone who has been diagnosed with pertussis.

This includes:

- All household members regardless of age or immunization status, **ONLY** if there is an infant under the age of one year or a pregnant woman in her third trimester living in the household
- All children and adults in a home day care where a case has occurred, **ONLY** if there is an infant under the age of one year or a pregnant woman in her third trimester in regular attendance at the home day care
- All infants under one year of age and pregnant women in the third trimester who have had face to face contact or spent at least one hour in the same room as someone who was infectious with pertussis

## Things you can do to protect your family and community members:

- Check your immunization records to see if you and your family members are up-to-date for pertussis (whooping cough) immunization. Get immunized if you are not up-to-date.
- Watch your child and family members for signs of pertussis. Seek medical attention if a cough develops (especially for infants and pregnant women in the last 3 months of pregnancy).
- If you have an infant under one year of age, ensure he or she is immunized and do not expose him or her to other people coughing. Ensure all other family members and close contacts are immunized to help protect your infant.
- Children with pertussis should not attend school until the antibiotic medication has been taken for 5 days. If no treatment is given, children should not attend school until 3 weeks have passed since the start of the coughing spells.
- Persons who have pertussis should avoid contact with other people until antibiotic medication has been taken for 5 days or 3 weeks have passed since the start of the coughing spells if no antibiotics are taken.

## Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or contact Public Health at 519-575-4400 ext. 5275.

Alternate formats of this document are available upon request.

## Region of Waterloo Public Health

*Infectious Disease Program*

519-575-4400 ext. 5275