



# Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

## What is pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis, or “whooping cough,” is a serious bacterial infection of the lungs and throat. About one in 200 infants who get pertussis could die. Pertussis can cause pneumonia, convulsions, brain damage or death.

These complications are seen most often in infants. The bacteria are easily spread by coughing, sneezing or close face-to-face contact. Pertussis can cause severe coughing that often ends with a whooping sound before the next breath. This cough can last several months and occurs more often at night.

## How does a person get pertussis?

- The bacteria are spread by direct contact with airborne droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person.
- The bacteria spreads easily when people are in close contact as in households, classrooms, and child care centres.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

- Symptoms usually develop 7 to 10 days after a person has become infected.
- The first signs of illness are usually a runny nose and an irritating cough, similar to a cold.
- Within days, the cough becomes more frequent and severe, often occurring in attacks.
- The coughing attack may end with vomiting and/or shortness of breath.
- A characteristic “whoop” at the end of the coughing spell is common in children under one year of age.
- Symptoms are usually worse at night.
- The cough can last 6 to 10 weeks.

## How is pertussis treated?

- Early diagnosis and treatment is important.
- A special swab that reaches the back of the nasal cavity is used to test for pertussis. A throat swab is not appropriate.
- Treatment with an appropriate antibiotic (azithromycin, clarithromycin, erythromycin) is needed.

## How is pertussis prevented?

- Pertussis immunization is available for children up to 14 years of age.
- Watch for signs and symptoms.
- If symptoms occur, see a doctor for early diagnosis and treatment.

### **A person with symptoms, may continue to attend school, work, child care facility or activity group unless:**

- there is a child under one year of age in attendance **or**
- there is a pregnant woman in the last three months of pregnancy in attendance (in a school setting this means the teacher in the same class as the case).
- Symptomatic household contacts should be treated.
- Close contacts (those under one year of age or pregnant women in the last three months of pregnancy) who are not symptomatic should be assessed by a doctor and put on preventive antibiotics.

## Quick Facts

- Pertussis vaccine is part of routine childhood immunization.
- The main symptom of pertussis is a persistent, dry, irritating cough.
- Early diagnosis and treatment is important.

**For more information, contact your public health nurse,  
or your doctor, or HealthLine at 1-877-800-0002.**