

## **What is it?**

Pertussis (whooping cough) is an infection caused by bacteria. It usually begins with a runny nose and an irritating cough that gradually (over 1-2 weeks) becomes more frequent and severe. The cough may end in gagging, vomiting, or trouble breathing. In children the coughing is often followed by a loud “whoop” noise when breathing in. Infants under six months of age, teenagers and adults often do not develop the typical “whoop” sound.

Whooping cough can last for 1-2 months or even longer. It is most severe in infants under one year of age. Often these infants become so sick that they have to be cared for in the hospital. An adult may not develop as severe a disease as children, but can still spread the infection to children and other adults.

## **How is the disease spread?**

It is spread through the air by droplets that form when a person with the disease coughs or sneezes. People with whooping cough spread germs from the time they have the first symptoms (runny nose) until three weeks after the coughing begins. This infectious period can be reduced to 5 days with antibiotic treatment.

It will take 6 to 20 days to become ill after coming in contact with someone who has whooping cough.

## **How is it treated?**

A person with whooping cough is usually given medication called antibiotics for 7 days. This will help to kill the bacteria in the nose and throat that cause the disease. Unless the antibiotics are started very early in the illness, they will not have any effect on how long the symptoms last but will help lessen the chance of spreading the disease to others.

In some cases, those who are in close contact with someone who has whooping cough may also be given antibiotics. This may include people living in the same house or attending the same daycare, especially if there is a pregnant woman in the last three months of pregnancy, or an infant less than one year old. This may stop the disease from developing or may lessen the severity if the illness develops.

It is important that people with whooping cough stay home and avoid pregnant women and infants (less than 12 months) until they have received at least 5 days of the 7 day course of antibiotics.

If you think your child may have whooping cough, do not send him/her to school or daycare and take him/her to the doctor. The doctor can do a special swab to test for the bacteria that causes whooping cough.

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### **How is whooping cough prevented?**

Infections like whooping cough can be reduced or prevented by washing your hands properly with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand rub and covering your nose and mouth with your upper arm or a tissue when coughing or sneezing.

The best way to prevent whooping cough is to get immunized (vaccinated). Check to see if your child's vaccinations are up to date. The vaccine will prevent disease in about 85% of children and reduce the severity of the disease in others.

Adults should also be immunized for whooping cough. This not only helps to protect them, but also helps to protect children around them who are likely to become much more ill with the infection.

### **Is the vaccine for whooping cough safe?**

The vaccines are safe. Side effects are generally mild and may include soreness, swelling and redness at the spot where the needle is given. Some people may get a mild fever, body aches and feel tired for a day or two after the vaccination.

Serious allergic reactions, though rare, may occur with any vaccine or drug. Serious reactions should be reported to your local health unit and/or health care provider.

The benefits of protection against the disease far outweigh any risk of the vaccine.

### **Other Questions?**

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 or 1-800-267-2803, ext. 349. | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | [hpepPublicHealth.ca](http://hpepPublicHealth.ca)

### **References**

- Heymann, D.L., (2008). *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual* (19th Ed.). Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.
- Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, DISEASES: Pertussis, May 2009.

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