



Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, also called whooping cough, is a very contagious infection of the respiratory tract. It is caused by a bacterium called *Bordetella pertussis*. It occurs more often in children and adolescents, but adults can also develop pertussis.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts like a common cold with sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough that then develops into severe coughing spells. The coughing spells may last as long as 6 to 12 weeks. The disease gets its common name from the “whoop” sound people often make as they try to catch their breath after one of these coughing spells. The coughing spells begin very abruptly and may end with vomiting. Infants less than 6 months old, and teenagers and adults, often do not have the whoop-sounding cough, so anyone who has a persistent cough should see a health care provider to make sure the cough is not pertussis.

How do you get pertussis?

Pertussis is spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes and the bacteria are spread into the air and other people breathe them in. You can also become infected through direct contact with discharges from the nose or throat of an infected person. If you are not protected against pertussis through vaccination, you can become ill with this disease.

You are more likely to get pertussis if you are in close contact with someone who has the disease. Pertussis often spreads among family members, in schools and in other situations where there is very close contact between people.

When is pertussis contagious?

Pertussis is contagious in the early stage before the coughing spells develops, and for 3 weeks after the coughing spells begin. It is no longer contagious after 5 days of antibiotic treatment. While contagious, adults and children with pertussis should avoid contact with young children, infants, and women in their third trimester of pregnancy and stay home until feeling well. Children with pertussis should not attend school or childcare until 5 days after the start of antibiotic treatment.

Who is at risk of pertussis?

Children less than 1 year of age are at the highest risk from pertussis. This is because children in this age group are not yet fully immunized and can develop more serious complications if they become infected. In addition, pregnant women who become ill with pertussis in their 3rd trimester (particularly during the last 3 weeks of pregnancy) are at risk of passing the illness on to their baby after it is born. Most other people recover from pertussis without complications.

Is there treatment for pertussis?

A person with pertussis is usually given antibiotics. A person who has been in close contact with someone who has pertussis may also be given antibiotics. This includes all household contacts where there is an infant less than one year old or a pregnant woman in her third trimester.

How to be protected?

The best way to protect children against pertussis is to have them immunized. The pertussis vaccine is part of the [routine childhood vaccine schedule](#), which is given at 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, and 18 months old, at 4 to 6 years of age and again at 14 to 16 years of age. If pertussis is circulating in your child's school or childcare facility, watch for symptoms and contact your health care provider if these symptoms develop. Pregnant individuals should receive a dose of pertussis-containing vaccine in every pregnancy, ideally between 27-32 weeks of gestation. A one-time dose for adults who have not received a booster vaccination is recommended.

For further information visit OttawaPublicHealth.ca or the websites listed below:

- Ottawa Public Health Parenting in Ottawa
<https://www.parentinginottawa.ca/en/shared-content/vaccines-children-or-youth-need.aspx#At-six-months>
- Ottawa Public Health Parenting in Ottawa – Safety during Pregnancy
<https://www.parentinginottawa.ca/en/becoming-a-parent-and-pregnancy/staying-healthy-in-pregnancy.aspx#Communicable-diseases-and-pregnancy>
- Canadian Pediatric Society
http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/pertussis_whooping_cough
- Ministry of Health
<https://www.ontario.ca/document/immunization-well-child-toolkit/pertussis-whooping-cough>

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