



Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is whooping cough?

Pertussis, a respiratory illness commonly known as whooping cough, is a very contagious disease caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. These bacteria attach to the cilia (tiny, hair-like extensions) that line part of the upper respiratory system. The bacteria release toxins, which damage the cilia and cause inflammation (swelling).

How is it spread?

People with pertussis usually spread the disease by coughing or sneezing while in close contact with others, who then breathe in the pertussis bacteria. Many infants who get pertussis are infected by older siblings, parents or caregivers who might not even know they have the disease.

What is the incubation period?

Symptoms of pertussis usually develop within 7–10 days after being exposed, but sometimes not for as long as 6 weeks.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The disease usually starts with cold-like symptoms and maybe a mild cough or fever. After 1 to 2 weeks, severe coughing can begin. Unlike the common cold, pertussis can become a series of coughing fits that continues for weeks.

As the disease progresses, the traditional symptoms of pertussis appear and include:

- Paroxysms (fits) of many, rapid coughs followed by a high-pitched "whoop"
- Vomiting (throwing up)
- Exhaustion (very tired) after coughing fits

What type of treatment and care should be given?

Pertussis is generally treated with antibiotics and early treatment is very important. Treatment may make your infection less severe if it is started early, before coughing fits begin. Treatment can also help prevent spreading the disease to close contacts (people who have spent a lot of time around the infected person). Treatment after three weeks of illness is unlikely to help because the bacteria are gone from your body, even though you usually will still have symptoms. This is because the bacteria have already done damage to your body.

Should a person with whooping cough be isolated?

Exclude for work/school for five days after commencing antibiotic treatment, provided that there is no fever.

Where can a child receive vaccination against this disease?

The best way to prevent pertussis (whooping cough) among infants, children, teens, and adults is to get vaccinated. If you have been vaccinated, the infection is usually less severe.

The DTaP vaccine is a shot given to children younger than seven years of age that combines the vaccines for pertussis and two other serious diseases: tetanus and diphtheria.

Children should get five doses of the DTaP vaccine at the following ages for best protection:

- One dose each at 2 months, 4 months, and 6 months;
- A fourth dose at 15 through 18 months; and
- A fifth dose at 4 through 6 years of age.

If you or your child has not been vaccinated against pertussis, contact your physician or visit the Child Health Immunization Clinic located at the Hamilton Health Centre, 67 Victoria Street, Hamilton, to have be immunized as soon as possible.

Adapted from:

“*Pertussis (Whooping Cough).*” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013 (<http://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/>, accessed 12 May 2014)