



Durham Region Health Department **Facts about...**



Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is it?

Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a highly contagious bacterial infection that attacks the respiratory system.

Pertussis is most severe when it occurs in the first twelve months of life and can lead to serious complications.

People who are not fully vaccinated are most at risk for pertussis. People who are vaccinated may also be at risk for pertussis as their immunity may decrease over time.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is very contagious and is spread easily from person to person through droplets in the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread by having direct contact with nose and throat secretions of an infected person or through contact with objects touched by an infected person.

People who spend as little as one hour in the same room as a person with pertussis may get sick. Symptoms often develop within 5 to 10 days after you come into contact with the bacteria.

Pertussis is most contagious during the first two weeks after the infected persons cough begins. People with pertussis can spread the bacteria for up to three weeks. The risk of spread is low after the third week of symptoms.

What do I look for?

In the early stages, pertussis appears to be nothing more than a common cold. Pertussis most often starts with a runny nose, sneezing and coughing. The cough gradually gets worse over the next one to two weeks until there are episodes of repeated, violent coughing. These coughing “fits” may end in either a high pitched “whoop” sound, loss of breath or vomiting. The coughing decreases over time but can take weeks to months to go away completely.

Infants under six months of age and people who have been vaccinated often do not have the “whoop” or the coughing fits. Vaccinated people who become ill with pertussis usually have only mild illness.

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905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729 | durham.ca/health

If you require this information in an accessible format, contact 1-800-841-2729.



How is it treated?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics. After five days of treatment, the antibiotics stop the spread of the bacteria. People with pertussis should not be in contact with children, babies, or women in their third trimester of pregnancy, until after five days of taking antibiotics.

For infants, close family members with infants or pregnant women in their third trimester who have been in close contact with a person with pertussis, it may be recommended that an antibiotic be taken to prevent them from getting sick.

How can I protect myself?

- Pertussis is best prevented by vaccination.
- See 'Facts About...Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus, Polio & Haemophilus Influenza B Vaccines'.
- Keep up to date with vaccinations and talk to your health care provider about your need for other vaccines.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water or use hand sanitizer when hands are not visibly dirty.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow and encourage others to do the same.
- Wash your hands after handling nose and throat secretions (e.g., after throwing out facial tissues containing nose and throat secretions).
- Do not share water bottles, straws, eating utensils, cigarettes, toothbrushes, toys or anything else that has been in contact with saliva, nose or throat secretions.
- If you are ill, stay at home and isolate yourself from others.

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