

# PERTUSSIS

## (Whooping Cough)



## What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a highly contagious bacterial disease that affects the respiratory tract. People of any age can become ill with pertussis, but it is particularly severe in the first year of life and may require hospitalization.

Pertussis in adults has increased significantly since about 2004. As adolescent and adult cases increase, newborns are again at risk of getting pertussis before their vaccinations can be completed. Infants under one are also more likely to develop complications.

### **PUBLIC HEALTH**

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19-5467

The logo for York Region, featuring a stylized red and white star above the text "York Region" in a serif font.



## What are the symptoms of pertussis?

The range of symptoms and the severity of the disease can vary according to the age of the person, the degree of immunity, the use of antibiotics and if pertussis exists along with another respiratory infection.

In infants and young children, the disease begins much like a cold with a runny nose, possibly a low-grade fever and a mild but irritating cough for one to two weeks. The illness progresses to spells of explosive, uncontrollable coughing that can interrupt breathing, eating and sleeping. The cough is commonly followed by vomiting and exhaustion.

Following the cough, infants and children may make a loud crowing or “whooping” sound as they struggle to inhale air (hence the common name “whooping cough”). These coughing episodes can occur on their own or can be triggered by yawning, stretching, laughing, eating or yelling. They usually occur in groups, with multiple episodes every hour around the clock. The severe coughing spells usually continue for six to 10 weeks, but can last longer.

In older children, adolescents and adults, the symptoms are usually milder and without the typical whoop.

Symptoms usually develop between seven and 10 days after exposure to the bacteria, but may appear anywhere from five to 21 days afterwards.

## How does pertussis spread?

Pertussis is a very contagious disease. It is caused by the *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria, which live in an infected person’s mouth, nose and throat. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, the bacteria can be sprayed into the air and breathed in by people who are nearby. You can also become infected through direct contact with discharges from the nose or throat of an infected person.

A person who is infected with *Bordetella pertussis* can spread the bacteria to others from seven days prior to the onset of symptoms until 21 days after the cough starts, if left untreated.

If antibiotic treatment is started, the person is no longer contagious after five days. A young, unimmunized and untreated infant may be infectious for six or more weeks after the onset of the cough; an untreated immunized adolescent may be infectious for two weeks or more after cough onset.

## How can pertussis be prevented?

Immunization is the single most effective strategy for preventing pertussis. To prevent the spread of pertussis to others, a person who has the disease should:

- Stay away from school/workplace/daycare and avoid contact with others until they have completed five days of antibiotic treatment. If not taking antibiotics, they should stay at home for 21 days from the onset of the disease
- Notify anyone, especially pregnant women and parents of babies and young children, that has had recent contact with a person infected with pertussis,

People who have been in contact with an infectious person should:

- Check their immunization records to be sure they have been immunized against pertussis.
- Watch for signs of whooping cough.

People who have been in close contact with someone with pertussis (e.g. live in the same household/attend the same daycare/share the same airspace for extended periods) may be advised to take antibiotics to protect them from this disease.

## How is pertussis treated?

Antibiotics are commonly used to treat pertussis. The antibiotics reduce the infectiousness and eliminate symptoms when given early in the course of the illness. If not given early, antibiotics will reduce the infectiousness of pertussis but will not reduce the length or severity of symptoms.