

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a very contagious (easy to catch) disease of the lungs and throat.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts like a common cold, with sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Over the next week or two, the cough gets worse, leading to severe coughing spells that often end with a whoop (which is where the name whooping cough comes from). The cough can make a person gag or spit out mucous, and make it hard to take a breath. The cough can last up to a month or two, and is worse at night. Babies less than six months old, teenagers and adults often do not make the whooping sound. Therefore anyone who has a cough that lasts more than a week should see a doctor to make sure the cough is not pertussis.

Who gets pertussis?

Anyone, at any age, can get pertussis. But young children who have not been immunized get more sick than older children and adults.

How serious is pertussis?

Pertussis can sometimes cause:

- Pneumonia - one out of five cases;
- Convulsions or seizures - one out of thirty cases;
- Encephalopathy or brain damage - one out of one hundred cases;
- Death - one infant out of every 170. Most deaths - four out of five - are babies under a year old.

How does it spread?

When a person who has pertussis coughs or sneezes and spreads germs into the air, other people can get infected. A person who has pertussis and does not get it treated can spread the germ to others for up to three weeks after the coughing spells start.

Can you protect against pertussis?

The best way to protect children against pertussis is to get them immunized. The pertussis vaccine is part of the childhood vaccine program and is given at two months, four months, six months and eighteen months, at five years of age and again between 14 to 16 years of age (about grade 9). If you are not sure if your child has been immunized for pertussis and other diseases, check your child's record or ask your community health nurse. Protection from the vaccine decreases after several years. If immunized in childhood, there is almost no protection left by the teen years, which is why teenagers are now offered the adolescent/adult pertussis vaccine.

How is pertussis treated?

A person with pertussis is usually given an antibiotic. In addition, people at high risk and in close contact with someone who has pertussis, are given an antibiotic to prevent the disease. This includes infants less than one year of age and pregnant women in the last

three months of pregnancy, as well as all household and daycare contacts, if there is an infant less than one year of age or a pregnant woman in the last 3 months of pregnancy in the household or daycare. Pertussis vaccine may be offered as another preventative measure, depending on when the last known contact occurred.

People who have or *may* have pertussis should not go near babies or young children until they have been properly tested and/or treated for pertussis.

If you have been in contact with a person who has pertussis, you should call your family doctor or local health centre for more information.

If you get pertussis once, can you get it again?

Yes. Protection against pertussis after an infection decreases with time, so you can get the disease again.

Ways to help a child with pertussis

While your child is resting at home under a doctor's care, there are ways to make your child more comfortable, including:

- Keep your child quiet and calm. Staying calm will help prevent the coughing spells.
- Avoid smoke, dust, sudden noises or lights, and other unnecessary stimulation that may trigger coughing spells.
- Give your child frequent small drinks of fluid, and make sure they get enough to eat as coughing requires a lot of energy.
- If humidity helps ease coughing spells, use a cool mist humidifier in your child's room. If humidity worsens coughs, avoid it. Dry, hot, or polluted air may worsen coughing spells.

Contact Information

For more information contact Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323. #4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon

In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.

Adapted from BC HealthFiles