

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Pertussis (whooping cough) is an infection caused by bacteria. The infection usually begins with a runny nose and a cough. Soon, the cough becomes more frequent and severe. The cough may end in gagging, vomiting, or trouble breathing. Sometimes after a coughing attack, the child may give a loud “whoop” when breathing in, which is why the infection has been called “whooping cough.” The “whooping” symptom does not always occur and is usually only seen in young children.

Pertussis spreads easily from person to person in the same household or daycare when a person coughs. It takes 6 to 20 days to become ill after coming in contact with someone who has it. People with pertussis spread germs from the time they have the first symptoms (runny nose) until three weeks after the coughing begins. This infectious period can be reduced to five days with antibiotic treatment.

It takes a long time to get over pertussis as the cough lasts for 6 to 10 weeks. The disease is most severe in infants younger than one year of age. Many of these infants become so sick that they have to be cared for in hospital. Adults can also get pertussis. An adult may not develop as severe a disease as children, but can still spread the infection to children and other adults.

In children, pertussis can be prevented with a vaccine. All children should be vaccinated. The vaccine will prevent disease in about 85 percent of children and reduce the severity of the disease in others.

What can I do to help?

- Check your child's immunization record to see if his/her vaccine is up to date. Pertussis vaccines are given at 2, 4, 6, and 18 months (Pentacel) and then again between the ages of 4 and 6 years (Quadracel). Adacel is given between the ages of 14 and 16 years.
- If a case is identified in your child's day care or school, watch your child for the symptoms. If your child develops the symptoms, take your child to the doctor, right away, to be checked. Be sure to let your doctor know your child is a contact of a case of pertussis.
- If your child has pertussis and is in contact with vulnerable individuals, he/she should not return to day care or school until the antibiotic has been taken for five days. If no treatment is taken, your child must be excluded for 21 days.

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- If an adult has had a persistent, continuous cough for longer than one to two weeks, he/she should be checked by a doctor. It could be pertussis and require treatment with antibiotics.
- If a child or adult has pertussis, certain household contacts may need to start a course of antibiotics. This may stop the disease from developing or may lessen the severity if the illness develops.
- In daycares where there are vulnerable individuals (infants less than 1 year or pregnant women in their 3rd trimester), children and adults may need to take the antibiotics.

For more information contact KFL&A Public Health, Communicable Disease Team at 613-549-1232 or 1-800-267-7875.