

Fact Sheet

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis (Whooping Cough)?

Pertussis is a respiratory infection in the lungs and throat caused by the *Bordetella pertussis* bacteria.

Pertussis occurs worldwide and in Canada, including in PEI, there may be individual cases or outbreaks of pertussis diagnosed every year.

Without treatment, symptoms of pertussis can last for weeks or months, and can lead to pneumonia, brain damage or even death. Although anyone can get pertussis, it is most dangerous for children under 1 year of age, especially if they are unvaccinated or under-vaccinated. It is important that you and your children receive all of your vaccinations for protection of yourself and others.

How is pertussis spread?

Pertussis is spread easily when an infected person coughs or sneezes into the air and the droplets come into contact with another person or with objects, including toys, which may have been contaminated by an infected person.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts with runny nose, low fever, sneezing and mild coughing. The cough gets worse over 7-10 days and progresses to fits of coughing which may last from 2-8 weeks and occur more frequently at night.

The cough may cause gagging, vomiting or have a “whoop” sound at the end. Often a thick clear mucous is spit out.

Symptoms for infants include:

- severe cough (some do not cough)
- choking after coughing
- feeding poorly
- having difficulty breathing.

For older children and adults, pertussis symptoms may be less severe, with cold like symptoms and a persistent cough lasting longer than one week.

Symptoms usually start 7-10 days after being exposed to a person with pertussis, but it can be as early as 5 days to 20 days after exposure.

How is pertussis treated?

Pertussis is usually treated with an antibiotic which is prescribed by a doctor or nurse practitioner. Once you have had 5 days of antibiotic treatment you are no longer considered to be contagious to others.

If you think you have pertussis, stay away from those who have not been immunized against pertussis, in particular, infants, children, pregnant women or persons who may have an auto-immune disorder, until such time that you are assessed by your health care provider and treated. Keep in mind that while you are contagious it is important to stay home from work, community gatherings, family gatherings, hospitals or places where there may be vulnerable people.

How is pertussis prevented?

The pertussis containing vaccine is given as part of PEI's publicly funded childhood immunization program starting at 2 months of age. A child under 6 years old needs five doses of the pertussis containing vaccine. Protection from the vaccine fades over time, so it's important to get a booster dose.

Booster doses are offered free of charge through HPEI Public Health Nursing to:

- teens in Grade 9 through the school immunization program
- adults who require a once in a lifetime adult dose of pertussis containing vaccine
- Pregnant women (also offered by your obstetrician), new mothers (also offered in the hospital) and those who will be in close contact with a new baby (eg. fathers, grand-parents, caregivers) in order to [protect your new baby from pertussis.](#)