



## Pertussis (Whooping Cough) FAQs

### What is pertussis?

- Pertussis, also known as whooping cough, is a contagious (easily spread) infection of the lungs and airways caused by a bacteria
- Pertussis can be prevented by getting vaccinated
- The bacteria are found in your mouth, nose and throat
- Pertussis can infect people of all ages

### How is pertussis spread?

- Pertussis is easily spread through droplets in the air due to coughing or sneezing by an infected person
- Pertussis can be spread by sharing food, drinks, toys, cigarettes, kissing or (rarely) through touching objects like countertops and doorknobs
- Pertussis can be spread in the early stages of the infection when symptoms are not severe, and can continue to be spread for up to 3 weeks after the cough starts if not treated with antibiotics,
- You are no longer considered contagious (able to spread the disease) after 5 days of taking an appropriate antibiotic prescribed by a health care provider

### What are the symptoms of pertussis?

- The first symptoms of pertussis usually appear 7-10 days after exposure, but may take up to 28 days to develop
- Early symptoms are similar to a common cold:
  - Mild fever
  - Runny nose
  - Sneezing
  - Red watery eyes
  - Mild cough
- 10-14 days after the first symptoms appear, the cough becomes worse, leading to severe, repeated and forceful coughing spells that often end with a whooping sound before the next breath
- The cough tends to be worse at night
- The coughing spells may end with vomiting and difficulty breathing
- Babies less than 6 months of age, teenagers, adults and those partially vaccinated may not make the “whoop” sound when they cough

- The coughing stage of pertussis usually lasts for 1-6 weeks, but may last for many months
- You may experience bouts of coughing anytime you are winded, or if you get a cold or other minor illness; this can occur even months after the original infection is over
- Babies and small children with pertussis may have difficulty feeding or breathing and may turn blue around the mouth during the bouts of coughing

### **What are the complications of pertussis?**

- Pertussis is most dangerous for children under 1 year of age
- In some cases pertussis can lead to serious complications such as;
  - Painful ear infections
  - Loss of appetite
  - Dehydration
  - Exhaustion
  - Bacterial pneumonia (the most common cause of death)
  - Brain damage
  - And sometimes death

### **How is pertussis diagnosed?**

- Only your healthcare professional can diagnose pertussis using a laboratory test and examining your physical symptoms
- See your health care provider early if you suspect you may have pertussis or have been exposed to someone with pertussis

### **How is pertussis treated?**

- Pertussis is treated with antibiotics
- Antibiotics taken during the early stages of the illness will help reduce the spread of infection and the length of the illness
- You must stay isolated at home until you have taken at least 5 days' worth of effective antibiotics
  - Rest as much as possible
  - Drink plenty of fluids
  - Eat frequent small meals
  - Elevate the head of the bed when you rest or sleep

- Talk to your health care provider before using any over-the-counter cough medicines

### **What should you do if you become ill or think you may be exposed to pertussis?**

- If you think you may have been exposed to someone with pertussis or have symptoms of pertussis yourself you should notify your health care provider as soon as possible. Your health care provider may be able to give you antibiotics right away to prevent you from coming down with pertussis or prevent a severe case of pertussis
- If you have a cough longer than a week, you should contact a health care provider
- It is important to stay away from infants, young children and women in their last 3 months of pregnancy until antibiotic treatment is completed

### **How is the spread of pertussis prevented?**

- The best way to protect against pertussis is to receive a pertussis-containing vaccine
- Vaccination helps prevent the spread of pertussis and protects people who are not able to get the vaccine
- All vaccines including the ones used to prevent pertussis are safe and effective
- Side effects to the vaccine are mild and only last a few days
- The vaccine is free for NWT residents and is routinely offered to everyone in the NWT according to the [NWT Immunization Schedule](#); the schedule is available on the Department of Health and Social Services website
- There are two vaccines approved for use in the NWT that protect against pertussis:
  - [DTaP-IPV-Hib](#): Diphtheria, tetanus, **pertussis**, polio and *haemophilus influenza* type B that is offered to infants and children under 7 years of age
  - [Tdap](#): Tetanus, diphtheria, **pertussis** vaccine that is offered to youth, adults and to pregnant women during each pregnancy
- Having the vaccine during childhood is not enough; a booster is required as a teenager and every 10 years as an adult
- Women who contract pertussis in the third trimester of pregnancy have an increased risk of passing it on to their newborn babies. Pregnant women who get the vaccine for each pregnancy between 27-28 weeks will help prevent spreading pertussis to their baby once they are born

### **More information:**

- [Pertussis](#) (Government of Canada)
- [Pertussis](#) (GNWT)
- [Immunization/Vaccination](#) (GNWT)