

Fact Sheet

March 2012

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough, known medically as Pertussis, is a vaccine-preventable disease that is caused by bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. It gets its name from the high pitched gasp or whooping sound a person makes when trying to breathe after having a coughing attack.

Pertussis is a highly contagious infection of the respiratory tract. Although it initially resembles a common cold, whooping cough may become more serious, especially in infants under 1 year of age and pregnant women in their third trimester. Most teenagers and adults recover from whooping cough without complications.

How do you get whooping cough?

Bordetella pertussis, the bacteria that causes whooping cough, is found in the respiratory secretions (fluids from the mouth and nose) of someone with whooping cough. The bacteria spread when respiratory secretions (fluids) that have the bacteria get into the mucous membranes (e.g. nose or mouth) of a person. This can happen when a person with whooping cough coughs or sneezes.

Who is at risk of serious complications from whooping cough?

Whooping cough can cause serious complications in infants under 1 year of age and women in their third trimester.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

When symptoms first appear they are mild, like the common cold such as:

- Runny nose
- Sneezing
- Mild fever
- Loss of appetite
- Nasal congestion
- Red, watery eyes
- Dry cough
- General feeling of being unwell

After a week or two, the symptoms may become worse and usually include:

- Severe coughing attacks that bring up thick phlegm (mucous)
- Vomiting may occur after a child has a severe coughing attack
- Coughing attacks that end with a high-pitched whoop sound as a person gasps for air
- Fatigue from coughing so much

In adults, the symptoms of whooping cough may resemble those of bronchitis. Infants under 6 months of age, vaccinated children, teenagers and adults may not whoop at all, or as loudly as older, unvaccinated children do.

The cough can last for 1 to 2 months and may be worse at night. Even after treatment to kill the bacteria, a person may continue to cough as the body repairs the damage to the lining of the trachea (windpipe). However, the cough should get better over time.

Fact Sheet

How soon do the symptoms appear?

It can take from 6 to 21 days for symptoms to appear when you are exposed to the bacterium that causes whooping cough.

When and for how long is a person able to spread whooping cough?

Whooping cough is most contagious early on and can last up to 3 weeks. A person is no longer contagious after taking appropriate antibiotic treatment (medication) for 5 days.

How can the spread of whooping cough be prevented?

Get vaccinated. Infants, teenagers and adults should be vaccinated against whooping cough.

The vaccine should be given to infants at **2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age**, which is combined to protect against other childhood diseases such as diphtheria and tetanus. A booster dose should also be given when the child is between **4 and 6 years of age** and another booster between **14 and 16 years of age**.

Adults 19 to 64 years of age who did not receive whooping cough vaccine as part of their adolescent booster dose when they were 14 to 16 years of age should also be vaccinated against whooping cough. The vaccine is free and is called Adacel[®] or Boosterix[®].

For more information about the whooping cough (Pertussis) vaccine call the Toronto Public Health (TPH) Immunization Information Line: 416-392-1250.

Can whooping cough be treated?

Yes. Whooping cough can be treated with antibiotics. The antibiotic may not cure all the symptoms right away, but will stop a person from being contagious after being on the treatment for 5 days.

What should I do if I think I (or a family member) have whooping cough?

If there is no need for urgent medical attention, call your healthcare provider before going to his or her office. Let your healthcare provider know that you or your family member might have whooping cough. This will allow the healthcare provider to prepare for your visit and protect other patients.

I had whooping cough as a child. Can I get it again?

Many experts believe that adults can get whooping cough again if they have had it as a child because immunity decreases over 5 to 15 years. Therefore a booster vaccine is recommended for adults.

Where can I get more information?

For more information you can contact Toronto Health Connection: 416-338-7600, TTY: 416-392-0658. For information about the Pertussis vaccine call TPH Immunization Information Line: 416-392-1250, or visit our website at www.toronto.ca/health.