

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a serious infection of the airways caused by pertussis bacteria (germs).

People of any age can get pertussis. Young children who have not been immunized get sicker than older children and adults.

Pertussis can cause complications such as pneumonia, seizures, brain damage or even death. These complications happen most often in infants under 1 year of age. Each year in Canada, 1 to 3 deaths occur due to pertussis, mostly in babies less than 3 months of age who have not been immunized.

What is pertussis vaccine?

There are a number of pertussis vaccines available in B.C. that protect against pertussis. The pertussis vaccines are provided in combination with other vaccines such as diphtheria, polio and tetanus and are free as part of your child's routine immunizations.

A pertussis vaccine is also available for older children and adults. A booster dose of pertussis vaccine is provided free to grade 9 students in B.C. Adults who were not immunized against pertussis as children can also get a dose of the vaccine for free. A booster dose of the pertussis vaccine is recommended for adults who were immunized in childhood but is not provided for free in B.C.

During an outbreak of pertussis, the vaccine may be provided for free to women who are 26 or more weeks pregnant to protect them and their newborns.

For more information about pertussis vaccines see the following:

- [HealthLinkBC File #18c Tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis \(Tdap\) vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #105 Diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, hepatitis b, polio and haemophilus influenzae type b \(DTaP-HB-IPV-Hib\) vaccine](#)

How does pertussis spread?

Pertussis spreads easily when an infected person coughs, sneezes or has close contact with others. Sharing food, drinks or cigarettes, or kissing someone who has the pertussis bacteria can also put you at risk. Pertussis can be spread to others during the early stages of the infection when symptoms are not severe and if left untreated, it can spread up to 3 weeks after the cough starts.

What are the symptoms?

Pertussis starts like a common cold with symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose, mild fever and a mild cough.

Over the next 2 weeks, the cough gets worse, leading to severe, repeated, and forceful coughing spells that often end with a whooping sound before the next breath. The cough of pertussis can last several months and occurs more often at night. The cough can make a person gag or spit out mucous, and make it hard to take a breath. In babies, pertussis can cause periods of apnea in which their breathing is interrupted.

Babies less than 6 months old, teenagers, and adults may not make the whooping sound. Therefore, anyone that could have been exposed to pertussis and who has a cough that lasts more than 1 week should see a health care provider.

Is there a treatment?

Pertussis is treated with antibiotics. If taken during the early stages of your illness, the antibiotics help reduce the spread of infection and the length of illness.

People at high risk of serious illness who are in close contact with someone with pertussis can be given an antibiotic to prevent the disease. This includes infants less than 1 year of age and pregnant women in the last 3 months of pregnancy, as well as all of their household and daycare contacts.

People who have or may have pertussis should not have contact with others, especially babies, young children, and pregnant women in their 3rd trimester 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 health care provider for more information.

What is the home treatment?

After seeing a health care provider, the following home treatment tips may help you to be more comfortable while you rest and recover.

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

For more information on immunizations visit ImmunizeBC at <https://immunizebc.ca/>.



For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.