

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a very contagious (easy to catch) disease of the lungs and throat.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis starts like a common cold, with sneezing, runny nose, low-grade fever and a mild cough. Over the next week or two, the cough gets worse, leading to severe coughing spells that can end with a whoop (which is where the name whooping cough comes from). The cough can make a person gag or spit out mucus, and make it hard to take a breath. The cough can last up to a month or two, and is worse at night. Babies less than six months old, teenagers and adults often do not make the whooping sound. Therefore anyone who has a cough that lasts more than a week should see a health care provider to make sure the cough is not pertussis. Anyone who develops a cough and has been in contact within the last 21 days with someone who has pertussis should see a health care provider.

Who gets pertussis?

Anyone, at any age, can get pertussis. Young children and those who have not been immunized get sicker than older children and adults.

How serious is pertussis?

Pertussis can sometimes cause:

- Pneumonia — one out of five cases
- Convulsions or seizures — one out of 30 cases
- Encephalopathy or brain damage — one out of 100 cases
- Death — one infant out of every 170. Most deaths — four out of five — are babies under a year old

How does it spread?

When a person who has pertussis coughs or sneezes and spreads germs into the air, other people can get infected. A person who has pertussis and does not get it treated can spread the germ to others for up to three weeks after the coughing spells start.

Can you protect against pertussis?

The best way to protect children and adults against pertussis is to be immunized. Children and adults not immunized or not fully immunized are at the greatest risk of getting pertussis and spreading the disease to others.

Pertussis immunization is part of Yukon's routine immunization schedule and is given at:

- 2, 4, 6, and 18 months
- before starting kindergarten (at 4-6 years of age)
- a booster dose in grade 9 (at 14-16 years of age)
- a booster dose given after 19 years of age

Booster doses against pertussis are required doses that help your immune system remember how to fight pertussis; the booster dose keeps the earlier immunizations against pertussis working. Without these booster doses your body will not be able to effectively fight pertussis.

These immunizations, like all routine Yukon Immunizations, are available free of charge at your local health centre.

If you are not sure if you or your child has been immunized against pertussis and other diseases, check your child's record or ask your community health nurse.

How is pertussis treated?

A person with pertussis is usually given an antibiotic. In addition, people at high risk and in close contact with someone who has pertussis are given an antibiotic to prevent the disease. This includes infants less than one year of age and pregnant women in the last three months of pregnancy, as well as all household and daycare contacts, if there is an infant less than one year of age or a pregnant woman in the last three months of pregnancy in the household or daycare. Pertussis vaccine may be offered as another preventative measure, depending on when the last known contact occurred.

People who have or *may* have pertussis should not go near babies or young children 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 or local health centre for more information.

If you get pertussis once, can you get it again?

Yes. Protection against pertussis after an infection decreases with time, so you can get the disease again.

Ways to help a child with pertussis

While your child is resting at home under a health care provider's care, there are ways to make your child more comfortable, including:

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

Contact Information

For more information contact:

- Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323.
#4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon
- In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.
- Whitehorse Health Centre at 667-8864
- Watson Lake Health Centre at 536-7483
- All other Community Health Centres Prefix of community +4444

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