

November 12, 2024

Dear Community Member,

You may be aware that Canada is seeing an increase in pertussis (whooping cough) cases, including in Nova Scotia. Whooping cough is very serious for babies and young children, especially for newborns because they cannot be vaccinated until at least two months old and can become very sick from whooping cough. This is why it is important for people who are pregnant to get a dose of the whooping cough vaccine (Tdap) during their third trimester, as the immunization offers some protection for newborns.

The following information is important for you to know as you go through pregnancy and caring for your new baby. You can also use the included infographic as an easy reference for vaccination scheduling.

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a vaccine preventable disease that can be easily spread from person to person. It is spread by close contact with drops of fluid from the nose and throat of someone who has the disease.

People with whooping cough can pass it on before they develop a serious cough, so they may not be aware that they have the infection. Without treatment, they can remain infectious (can spread the disease to others) for about three weeks after a severe cough starts.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of whooping cough typically start with mild cough, runny nose and low-grade fever. This progresses to spells of a severe, frequent cough, which can be followed by a “whoop.” Sometimes coughing ends in vomiting, and the cough can be worse at night.

While most people recover from whooping cough within a few months, infants are at high risk for serious disease, which can include pneumonia and other lung complications, hospitalization and death.

How is it treated?

Antibiotics given very early in a whooping cough infection can improve symptoms. Unfortunately, whooping cough is extremely difficult to tell apart from other, more common causes of the mild symptoms seen early in infection. Antibiotics don’t work (and should generally not be used) against these other, more common causes. Given later, when whooping cough becomes more apparent, antibiotics can lessen the amount of time the person is infectious, but will not improve symptoms. Antibiotics can also prevent whooping cough from developing in people who were exposed to the infection.

You should see a healthcare provider if you have symptoms of whooping cough, or if you were exposed to a positive case. This is particularly important for pregnant people and children under one year of age as preventative treatment is available.

Please wear a mask to healthcare appointments, and let the staff know your symptoms so measures can be taken to prevent spread to others.

How can it be prevented?

The whooping cough vaccine offers good protection against getting sick, and significantly lessens symptoms for those who do get the infection. Every child should get a whooping cough vaccine at 2, 4, 6 and 18 months of age. A booster vaccine should be received between ages 4 and 6, in grade 7, and again as an adult. Everyone who is pregnant should receive a booster during the last trimester of their pregnancy. Whooping cough can be passed to babies, who have no protection from vaccination, causing severe illness. However, antibodies from immunization in pregnancy can also be passed to babies, which provides some protection against severe infection.

There is no charge for whooping cough vaccines. Whooping cough vaccination is available through primary care providers, community pharmacy primary care clinics and Public Health.

People with whooping cough should wear a mask if they need to go out, and avoid contact with young children and pregnant people.

Learn more:

Information about whooping cough, including vaccination, signs, symptoms and when to seek healthcare can be found at www.nshealth.ca/pertussis. People who think they/their family members might have whooping cough are encouraged to consult a primary care provider or call 811.

Sincerely,

Dr. Rim Zayed,
Regional Medical Officer of Health, Western Zone
Nova Scotia Health, Public Health

Preventing whooping cough in pregnant people and babies

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a highly contagious vaccine-preventable disease that can occur at any age. It is very serious for babies and young children, especially for newborns because they cannot be vaccinated until at least two months old and can become very sick from whooping cough. This is why it is important that people who are pregnant get a booster dose during their third trimester, as the immunization offers some protection for newborns.

What are the symptoms?

Whooping cough can begin as a mild cold, with a runny nose or congestion, sneezing and a mild cough or fever. After a week or two, symptoms typically become worse and can include:

- deep, rapid coughing spells that end with a “whooping” sound
- vomiting after coughing
- coughing that is worse at night
- apnea (periods of not breathing) in babies

These symptoms will start about 10 days after a person has been exposed to the bacteria but could appear 20 days later. The symptoms can last for 6-10 weeks. Although most people recover from the disease, infants are at higher risk for severe disease, which can include pneumonia and other lung complications, hospitalization and death. People who are immunized, older children and adults may experience milder illness.

When should I seek healthcare?

If you have whooping cough symptoms and/or are experiencing severe symptoms (e.g., difficulty breathing, prolonged high fever), please consult a healthcare provider or call 811. You should also talk to a healthcare provider if you believe you or your child under one year old have been in close contact with someone with whooping cough.

How is it treated?

Whooping cough is treated with an antibiotic prescribed by your healthcare provider. The earlier the antibiotic is taken (within three weeks of the cough starting), the less time the person will be infectious to others, although this may not decrease their symptoms. Some infants, children and adults who are in contact with a person with whooping cough may benefit from antibiotics that can prevent or reduce the symptoms.

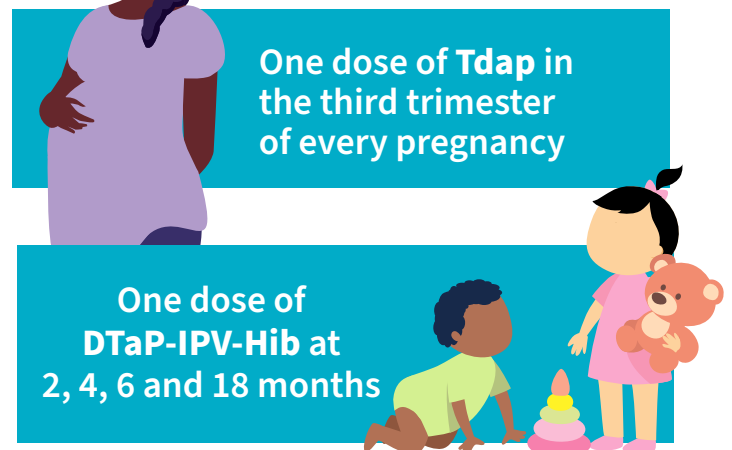
How can it be prevented?

The best way to prevent getting whooping cough and giving it to others is to make sure you are up to date with your vaccines and booster doses.

Whooping cough vaccines are part of the routine schedule for children, youth and adults. There are two vaccines that help protect children against whooping cough: DTaP and Tdap. Both also protect against diphtheria and tetanus and are used at different ages.

These vaccines are free and available through primary care providers, community pharmacy primary care clinics and Public Health.

Protection for pregnant people and babies



Protection for all ages

Nova Scotians should get whooping cough booster doses at the following ages:

- One dose of Tdap-IPV between ages 4 and 7
- One dose of Tdap between ages 12 and 18 (offered in grade 7 as part of the School Immunization Program)
- One dose of Tdap in adulthood

