

## **Pertussis**

Pertussis outbreaks have recently been detected in two communities within the DTHR. The following notes on pertussis were prepared by Public Health officials and published in newspapers in order to inform the public.

### **What is pertussis?**

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a contagious disease that spreads by respiratory droplets when people sneeze or cough or by droplets on people's hands when they touch other persons or objects. Common symptoms of the disease are forceful episodes of coughing, lasting 2 weeks or longer that may end in vomiting, temporary stopping of breathing or gagging. A whooping sound may be present as a person tries to breathe in. In older children and adults, the symptoms are usually less severe, the whoop is usually not present and complications are uncommon. The most noticeable complaint in adults with pertussis is the lingering, irritating cough, which may last 6 to 10 weeks. This disease is most serious in babies as it often progresses to pneumonia which may be fatal. Severe coughing makes it difficult for a baby to breathe, nurse or take a bottle. Infants may lose weight because they often vomit after coughing and feed poorly when ill. Although pertussis may be milder in older persons, these infected persons may infect other people including unimmunized or under-immunized infants. Complications of pertussis (such as ear infections and pneumonia) are common. Even without complications, infants are sick for 3 to 12 weeks.

### **What can I do personally to help fight this outbreak?**

Make sure your children and adolescents are up to date with the childhood immunization schedule. This will ensure they are adequately protected against childhood diseases, including pertussis. Pertussis vaccine does not prevent infection in everyone. However, it is very effective in reducing the severity of illness and the risk of complications. Also, to prevent the spread of this disease, basic hygiene measures should be reinforced. These include: covering your mouth while coughing, and washing hands frequently. Finally, when anyone has pertussis, she or he should not attend day care, school or go to other places with susceptible individuals (those with no immunity to the disease) for 3 weeks from the onset of cough fits or until she or he has stopped coughing or until she or he has received at least 5 days of the recommended antibiotic. This will help prevent the spread of the disease to other children who may have younger siblings at home.

### **Should I see a physician?**

It is probably good to see a physician if you are developing symptoms of pertussis such as severe coughing fits, cough after which the person vomits or stops breathing, or cough with 'whooping sound' especially if you have been in direct contact with a confirmed case of pertussis. Your physician can confirm the diagnosis and offer the appropriate antibiotic treatment, if necessary. Antibiotics will also reduce the chance of passing the infection to someone else and may help reduce the severity or duration of symptoms.

### **What is in place to combat this?**

Local physicians are seeing patients to confirm the diagnosis and to offer antibiotic treatment. If pertussis is diagnosed, physicians will also offer preventive antibiotic treatments to household contacts to prevent

pertussis. The David Thompson Health Region is responsible for the childhood immunization program. Immunization is a very effective and safe way to protect everyone against a number of childhood diseases, including pertussis. This is an on-going program and is offered year-round. The Health Region has also introduced a new adolescent pertussis booster immunization program targeted at grade nine students to help slow down the spread of this disease in the community. Additional pertussis immunization clinics have been scheduled to accommodate children and adolescents who are not up-to-date with their immunization schedule. The Health Region has cooperated with local schools to inform them of the situation and to facilitate accelerated immunization in the schools and dissemination of messages to students and parents. Hockey coaches were also contacted to share useful information. Public Health staff contacts individuals with pertussis to investigate the situation and to offer advice on managing the situation, comfort measures, and immunization, when necessary. The investigation and control efforts are ongoing.

For more information on pertussis, contact **Health Link Alberta** at 1-866-408-LINK (5465).