

From: Dr. Janice Fitzgerald, Chief Medical Officer of Health

To: Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services, and Other Health Care Providers

Re: Update on Pertussis

Date: April 11, 2024

The Department of Health and Community Services (DHCS) has been monitoring an increase in cases of pertussis (whooping cough) across the province. Pertussis is caused by the bacteria, *Bordetella pertussis*, and is transmitted through respiratory droplets or indirect contact with contaminated surfaces. Pertussis transmission occurs year-round with more cases noted during respiratory season. From 2014 to 2023, an average of 3.6 pertussis cases were reported each year. Currently, 8 pertussis cases have been reported to public health since January 2024.

DHCS is advising health care providers to be on the alert for pertussis. Pertussis is a [notifiable disease](#) and should be reported in writing within 24 hours of laboratory or clinical diagnosis.

There are 3 stages of pertussis:

- **catarrhal stage** characterized by runny nose, low-grade fever, and mild occasional cough
- **paroxysmal stage** begins after 1-2 weeks and consists of severe coughing episodes sometimes accompanied by a distinct “whooping” sound at the end of a coughing episode
- **convalescent stage** which can last weeks to months.

Infants are at the highest risk of complications, such as pneumonia and seizures, and apnea may be their sole symptom.

Definitive diagnosis is made through a nasopharyngeal swab for *B. pertussis* DNA PCR, which is most effective when taken in the first 3 weeks of illness. Treatment is most effective when started within the first 2 weeks of symptom onset before the severe coughing episodes begin. For more information, please see the [Provincial Communicable Disease Control Manual](#) or [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Pertussis \(Whooping cough\)](#).

Vaccination is the most effective means of preventing the spread of pertussis. **We are asking practitioners to discuss the importance of being up to date with pertussis vaccine with their patients, especially for those that will be around children less than one year of age.**

Pertussis vaccination, as part of the provincial immunization program, is offered to:

- all children at 2, 4, 6, and 18 months of age
- all children at 4-6 years of age
- all children in grade 9
- pregnant people between 27 and 32 weeks gestation of each pregnancy
- adults at least 10 years from their school-age dose

For more information on provincial vaccine programs and eligibility, visit the [Provincial Immunization Manual](#).