

Whooping cough (pertussis)

February 2013

Whooping cough is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by the germ *Bordetella pertussis*.

Whooping cough is very infectious and affects people of all ages. It can be very serious in babies.

Controlling whooping cough in our population means we need to immunise our babies and children. It is also important to find and treat cases early.

What are whooping cough symptoms?

Whooping cough usually starts with a runny nose, mild fever and a cough. Coughing bouts can get worse and be followed by vomiting, choking or taking a big gasping breath which causes a “whooping” sound.

Infants may become very sick. They may go blue or stop breathing during coughing attacks and may need to go to hospital. This is a medical emergency.

The cough may last several months.

How is it spread?

Whooping cough is spread when infected people cough or sneeze without covering their mouths and noses. People close to them may be exposed to their germs.

The time between exposure and getting sick is usually seven to ten days, but can be up to three weeks. See *Have you or your child been in contact with someone who has whooping cough?* over page.

Whooping cough is most infectious at the very start of the illness.

Without treatment, a person is infectious for the first three weeks of coughing.

With appropriate antibiotics, a person is no longer infectious after five days.

How is it diagnosed?

It is important that the illness is diagnosed by a doctor. This usually involves a nose and throat swab. Sometimes a blood test is needed. The doctor may recommend treatment before test results confirm the diagnosis.

Laboratories and doctors confidentially notify cases to the Department of Health and Human Services. Public Health Nurses then work with doctors, families and contacts of people who have whooping cough.

This is to provide advice on how to stop further spread of the disease.

How is it treated?

In its early stages, whooping cough symptoms can be reduced by taking antibiotics. Antibiotics, if given early enough, may also help reduce the risk of spreading the infection to others.

Close contacts of cases of whooping cough are sometimes also given antibiotics. This helps prevent them from becoming sick and from spreading the infection to people who are vulnerable to serious illness.

How long should I stay away from others?

- If you have whooping cough and are being treated, stay away from childcare, school or work until five days after starting antibiotics.
- If you have whooping cough and are not being treated, stay away from childcare, school or work for three weeks from the start of symptoms.
- If you have whooping cough, stay away from young children, pregnant women, and people who have not been immunised against whooping cough. You should also try to stay away from people who live or work with infants or women in the last month of pregnancy.

How is it prevented?

Immunisation reduces the risk of serious whooping cough illness.

Immunisation is available through general practitioners and some local councils. The best protection is for babies and children to get all four doses of the pertussis, diphtheria and tetanus combination vaccine (DTaP) on time. Babies will have some protection after they have had at least two doses of vaccine. Before then, they are particularly vulnerable.

It is very important to keep people with coughing illnesses away from babies so they don't infect the baby with whooping cough or other germs.

Who should get immunised?

Babies and young children The vaccine is given to young children from six weeks of age, then at four and six months, and again at four years.

Teenagers Protection from infant immunisation lessens over five to 10 years. A booster dose is given to adolescents in secondary school.

Adults The following people should consider a booster dose:

- People (both mother and father) planning pregnancy.
- Parents and grandparents of newborn babies, including adoptive and foster parents.
- Anyone who works regularly in close contact with very young babies, for example childcare and healthcare workers.
- Anyone having a tetanus booster, which can be combined with whooping cough vaccine.

Pertussis vaccines for babies, young children and teenagers are available at no cost.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Have you or your child been in contact with someone who has whooping cough?

Please stay alert for symptoms of whooping cough for the next three weeks. See your doctor if you have symptoms now, or if any develop.

Some people should seek medical advice *straight away* after contact with whooping cough, even if they are well. Speak to your doctor or call a Public Health Nurse if:

- Your child has had contact and is less than one year old (particularly if less than six months)
- Your child has had contact and is not fully immunised
- You have had contact and are in the last month of pregnancy
- You have had contact and live or work with infants or women in the last month of pregnancy.

Have you or your child developed a cough that could be pertussis?

See your doctor. Until medically assessed the person with symptoms should keep away from childcare, school or work; and infants, pregnant women and people who have not been immunised against pertussis.

To speak to a Public Health Nurse, call the Public Health Hotline on 1800 671 738.