

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

What is Whooping Cough?

Whooping cough is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by the germ *Bordetella pertussis*, that results in a coughing illness.

Whooping cough affects people of all ages. It can be especially serious in babies and can cause death.

What are the symptoms?

Whooping cough usually starts like a cold with a runny nose, mild fever and a cough.

Coughing can get worse. Severe bouts of uncontrollable coughing can be followed by vomiting, choking or taking a big gasping breath which causes a 'whooping' sound.

In babies whooping cough can also cause feeding problems, breathing difficulties, and in some cases, death.

How is it spread?

Whooping cough is spread from infected people, usually during coughing or sneezing. Without treatment, a person can spread whooping cough for three weeks after the onset of cough. With the right antibiotics, this time can be reduced to five days.

The time from being in contact with the germ to when people get sick is about seven to ten days but can be up to three weeks.

How is it diagnosed?

The best test is a swab from the back of the nose or throat. Your doctor may start medication before the test results are back.

How is it treated?

Some people, particularly young children, may need treatment in hospital.

Antibiotics, if given early, are very important to help stop the spread of whooping cough to others.

The cough may continue for many weeks, even when treated with antibiotics.

How is it prevented?

Immunisation provides good protection against whooping cough but immunity fades which means booster doses are needed.

The most effective way to protect young babies from whooping cough is to receive the whooping cough vaccine during pregnancy. This protects the mother and provides some protection to the baby, before they are old enough for their first dose of vaccine.

Who should get immunised?

Whooping cough vaccine is provided free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) to:

- babies and young children from six weeks of age, four months and six months, 18 months and four years of age
- older children when they are in grade seven at school (this is a booster dose)

- people 20 years and younger who missed any of their childhood whooping cough vaccines
- refugee and humanitarian entrants (all ages)
- pregnant women: Whooping cough vaccine is recommended between 20 and 32 weeks in each pregnancy.

Other adults who should consider getting a booster dose are (the vaccine is **not** free for these groups):

- women who have just had a baby (if they were not given a dose during their pregnancy)
- people living in the same house or caring for babies such as other parents, grandparents or guardians
- anyone who works in close contact with very young babies, such as childcare workers and health care workers are recommended to receive whooping cough vaccine every 10 years
- anyone having a tetanus booster, which can be given in the same injection with whooping cough vaccine. This includes people at 50 years of age who are recommended to receive a tetanus booster and people who require vaccine for a tetanus prone wound
- anyone who is 65 years or older if they have not had a booster in the last ten years
- anyone who wants to reduce their risk of getting sick with whooping cough
- travellers are recommended to receive a booster dose if they had not had one in the past 10 years

Where can I get immunised?

The whooping cough vaccine is available from your doctor, some council immunisation clinics and some antenatal clinics.

What should I do if I have had contact with someone who has Whooping Cough?

Watch for symptoms of whooping cough for the next three weeks. See your doctor if you develop symptoms.

People who have been in close contact with people with whooping cough are sometimes also given antibiotics. This helps to stop them from getting sick and from giving whooping cough to people who might get very sick if they catch whooping cough.

The people who should see a doctor quickly after they have been close to someone with whooping cough, even if they feel well are:

- children who are less than six months of age
- children who are not fully immunised
- pregnant women (or their partner)
- people who live or work with children less than six months of age.

What should I do if I have Whooping Cough?

If you have whooping cough and you are infectious, stay away from childcare, school or work. Also stay away from young children, pregnant women. You should also try to stay away from people who live or work with babies or women in the last month of pregnancy.

If you are being treated with antibiotics you need to stay away until you have finished a five-day course of antibiotics.

If you are not being treated with antibiotics, you need to stay away for three weeks from the start of cough.

More information

For further information on vaccines and pregnancy please refer to:

www.health.gov.au/news/influenza-and-pertussis-whooping-cough-vaccination-in-pregnancy

Call the Public Health Hotline – Tasmania on **1800 671 738** to speak to a Clinical Nurse Consultant.

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