



Whooping cough

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough, also known as pertussis, is a highly contagious and very distressing disease.

Worldwide, it kills about 250,000 children every year. In Australia, more than 4,000 cases of whooping cough are notified each year.

A bacteria that is spread by coughing or sneezing causes whooping cough. It can cause severe prolonged bouts of coughing, with gasping for breath after the coughs. This gasping can cause a 'whoop' sound. Sometimes vomiting occurs after the coughing. The disease has been called 'the hundred day cough' because the cough may last from weeks to months.

Why is whooping cough so dangerous for young children?

There is no natural transfer of protection from mother to baby before birth, so a baby is at risk from birth. Children less than one year old are the most vulnerable. Very young babies may not have the typical cough, but may have episodes where they stop breathing.

Of children less than one year old who get whooping cough:

- Six out of ten will need to be admitted to hospital and many will need long periods in intensive care.
- 17% will develop pneumonia.
- 2% will have fits.
- 1% will develop infection of the brain, which can leave permanent brain damage.
- One in 250 will die of the disease.



Illustrations taken from *Understanding Childhood Immunisation*, with permission from the Commonwealth Department of Human Service and Health

How can we protect children from whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a preventable childhood disease. Vaccination can control it. How much protection a child receives from the vaccine depends on the number of doses the child has received, and the time since the last dose.

The immunisation schedule for whooping cough starts at two months of age, with three doses in the first six months of life. Booster doses are given at 18 months and at 4 to 5 years, at the time of school entry.

This vaccine not only protects against whooping cough, but also diphtheria and tetanus.

Is the whooping cough vaccine safe?

Yes, the vaccine is safe and effective. The main problem has been that it frequently

has some mild to moderate side effects. Local reactions such as redness and swelling at the injection site may occur, and there may be fever, crying and irritability. These reactions usually last no longer than 24 to 48 hours.

Serious reactions to the vaccine however are very rare. The risk of serious damage from whooping cough is hundreds of times greater than any risk that may be associated with the vaccine.

In the past there were some concerns about a possible association between the vaccine and brain damage in a few vaccinated individuals. This has been extensively studied and is thought either not to occur at all, or to occur extremely rarely (10 cases or less per million vaccinations).

If children are not vaccinated, they face the much

greater risk of brain inflammation and damage from the natural disease. In a million cases of whooping cough, this happens to 7,000 people.

Why is there now good news about the whooping cough vaccine?

The good news is that a new vaccine is now available in Australia, which has a much lower rate of side effects than the old vaccine. It is just as effective as the old one, if not more so.

The new vaccine is called acellular pertussis vaccine, because it is made from only parts of the killed germ, rather than the whole cell. It may be used instead of the old vaccine. However, there may be a charge for the three infant doses.

How does whooping cough vaccination benefit everyone?

Where immunity to whooping cough in a community is low, young babies may be infected by older children or adults. This can happen before they are old enough to be protected by vaccination. These young children are the most likely to die or be damaged. Immunising your child not only protects your own child, but boosts the immunity of the community, thus protecting those who can't protect themselves.

Need more information?

Talk to your family doctor about whooping cough vaccination for your children, and protect them from this distressing and common disease.

