

Pertussis – the facts

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a highly contagious disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis* and is spread by droplets from coughing and sneezing to 70–100% of susceptible household contacts and 50–80% of susceptible school contacts. Susceptible people are those who are either unvaccinated or have waning immunity since childhood vaccines. Whooping cough is particularly serious in infants under 12 months of age, while older children and adults usually have a milder disease.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may vary for different ages but first symptoms are usually similar to a cold. Severe cases develop sudden attacks of repetitive coughing and often a characteristic 'whoop' as the person gasps for breath. Not all cases get the 'whoop'. Babies may have pauses in breathing (apnoea). Vomiting often follows a coughing spasm. A person with whooping cough is infectious for up to three weeks after they start coughing. The cough may last for months.

Who should be immunised?

Babies are at risk from birth as no pertussis protection is passed from mother to newborn infant. Complete immunisation of children and new parents remains the most effective measure to control whooping cough. Pertussis vaccination is offered as part of the government funded immunisation program for children at two, four, six months, at four years and in year 10 of secondary school (or 15 years of age).

People become immune either through pertussis immunisation or by catching the disease itself, but protection is not life long and begins to fade after 6–10 years. Sometimes immunised people still contract pertussis, but they are likely to have a less severe illness and may not have the typical whoop.

Adult pertussis booster vaccines (combined with diphtheria and tetanus) are recommended for the following groups who have previously completed a primary (childhood) course of vaccine:

- adults planning pregnancy or for both parents as soon as possible after birth
- adults working with or caring for very young babies, especially health care workers and child care workers
- any adult wishing to protect themselves against whooping cough

Pertussis-containing vaccines licensed for use in Australia are Adacel® or Boostrix®.

It is important to note that Boostrix® is only provided free to adolescents in Year 10 (or age equivalent) and parents of new babies. Whilst pertussis booster vaccine is strongly recommended for the other groups outlined, **it is not funded**. All parents with children under eight years of age are urged to check their child's immunisations and catch up any missed doses with their doctor or council immunisation program.

What if my child has whooping cough?

If your child has whooping cough, they should not attend school, pre-school, day care or similar settings where there are young children and infants for 21 days **from onset of coughing** or until they have received at least the first five days of a course of antibiotics. If your child has been coughing for more than 21 days, they are no longer infectious and can go back to school or child care. In these circumstances, antibiotic treatment is not usually needed.

What about others who may be in contact with someone who has whooping cough?

Household members and very close contacts of someone with whooping cough may also be infectious. If you think you or your child may have whooping cough please consult your doctor as soon as possible. There are tests available (either a swab taken from the nose/throat or a blood test) to determine if you have whooping cough.

Antibiotics are not always recommended and should only be given within 14 days after last contact with the infectious case (for infants under 12 months, within 21 days after last contact). Antibiotics rarely prevent other people from getting whooping cough and their use should be limited to household or institutional (eg hospital) contacts at high risk that have had direct contact with an infectious case. Examples of high risk contacts are infants under 12 months of age, women in the last four weeks of pregnancy and people with suppressed immune function.

Can my child go to school?

Children less than seven years of age who have not received three doses of a pertussis containing vaccine should be excluded from school/children's services centres if they were in the same room with an infectious case. Exclusion is for 14 days after the last exposure to the infectious case, or until they have taken the first five days of a course of antibiotics.

For further information, please contact the Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit at the Department of Health on 1300 65 11 60.

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