

## Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

### 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 initial 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 stop 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 remains the most effective measure to control whooping cough. Pertussis vaccination is offered as part of the government funded immunisation program for children at 2, 4, 6 months, at 4 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 wane after 6-10 years. Sometimes immunised people still contract pertussis, but they are likely to have a less severe illness.

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 before 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). 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 if necessary 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 5 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 will not be given 14 days after first contact with the infectious case. 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.

### Can my child continue to go to school?

Unimmunised siblings under seven years of age and unimmunised close child care contacts must be excluded from school and children's services centres for 14 days from the last exposure to infection or until they have taken the first 5 days of a course of antibiotics. A child who has received less than 3 doses of a pertussis containing vaccine should be considered at risk of pertussis.

**For further information, please contact the Communicable Disease Control Unit at the Department of Human Services on 1300 65 11 60.**