

## WHOOPING COUGH (PERTUSSIS)

### WHAT IS WHOOPING COUGH?

- Whooping cough is a disease caused by infection with the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*.
- Whooping cough occurs in people of all ages but is most serious (and can be fatal) in young children.
- Whooping cough tends to occur in epidemics where large numbers of people become infected. Before immunisation was available, many young children died from whooping cough. Immunisation of children against whooping cough is the best way to protect them against this disease.

### HOW IS IT SPREAD?

- Whooping cough is easily spread by droplets produced by coughing or sneezing, or by direct contact with the secretions of the nose or mouth. A person with whooping cough will be able to spread it to other people for up to three weeks after the onset of the illness unless they are treated.
- The time between contact with the disease and becoming sick is usually seven to 10 days, but can be as long as 21 days.
- People living in the same household as someone with whooping cough are more likely to catch it.

### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF WHOOPING COUGH?

- Whooping cough usually begins like a cold: with a runny nose, tiredness and sometimes a mild fever.
- Coughing then develops. The cough usually occurs in bouts followed by a big deep gasp. This sometimes produces a 'whooping' sound. Sometimes people also vomit after coughing.
- Whooping cough can be very serious in young children. Sometimes they might go blue or even stop breathing during coughing attacks. Children may need to be treated in hospital.
- Older children and adults may have a less serious cough that occurs in bouts and continues for many weeks. It is important to remember that anybody who has an ongoing cough may have whooping cough.

### HOW IS WHOOPING COUGH TREATED?

- If a doctor thinks someone has whooping cough, a swab from the back of the nose or a blood test may be done to help confirm the diagnosis.

- An antibiotic called erythromycin is the best treatment for whooping cough, as it stops an infectious person from spreading whooping cough to other people. This will happen after the person has been treated for five days. Until then, the infectious person can still spread whooping cough and so they must stay away from work or school and stay away from children and babies. Antibiotics should be continued for seven days.
- Coughing often continues for many weeks even though, after being sick for three weeks or after five days of treatment, the person is no longer able to spread whooping cough to other people.

### CAN WHOOPING COUGH BE PREVENTED?

- Whooping cough can be prevented by immunisation. There is a vaccine available for children that stops them from getting whooping cough.
- Children need to be immunised at ages two months, four months, six months, 18 months and at four years of age.
- The protection that the vaccine gives against whooping cough only lasts a few years. This means that those immunised as young children can still get whooping cough later in life.
- Whooping cough can be prevented by treating those in contact with the disease. To stop the spread of whooping cough, people who live in the same house as someone with whooping cough will usually also need to take antibiotics.

### HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF AND MY FAMILY FROM WHOOPING COUGH?

- Make sure all children are fully immunised. If a child under eight years of age has missed an immunisation they can 'catch up' by seeing their local doctor.
- See your doctor if you or your child has a coughing illness that lasts more than a few days.
- If you have a baby in your family, make sure you don't let anyone with a coughing illness visit your baby. The best way to protect babies is to keep them away from anyone who may have whooping cough.

*For more information please contact your local public health unit, community health centre, or doctor. ☎*