

Pertussis (whooping cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (or whooping cough) is a disease caused by infection of the throat with the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*.

What are the symptoms?

- Pertussis usually begins like a cold, with a runny nose, tiredness and sometimes a mild fever.
- Coughing then develops, usually in bouts, followed by a deep gasp (or whoop). Sometimes people vomit after coughing.
- Pertussis can be very serious in small children. They might go blue or stop breathing during coughing attacks and may need to go to hospital.
- Older children and adults may have a less serious illness, with bouts of coughing that continue for many weeks regardless of treatment.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is spread to other people by droplets from coughing or sneezing. Untreated, a person with pertussis can spread it to other people for up to 3 weeks after onset of cough.

The time between exposure and getting sick is usually 7–10 days, but can be up to 3 weeks.

Who is at risk?

- Anyone can get pertussis.
- People living in the same household as someone with pertussis are more likely to catch it.
- Immunisation greatly reduces your risk of infection, but reinfection can occur.

How is it prevented?

Immunise your child on time

- The vaccine does not give lifelong protection against pertussis, and protection is sometimes incomplete.
- Children need to be immunised at 2, 4 and 6 months of age.
- Boosters are needed at 4 years of age and again at 15 years.
- Immunisation is available through general practitioners and some local councils.

Keep your baby away from people who cough

Babies need two or three vaccinations before they are protected. For this reason, it is very important to keep people

with coughing illnesses away from your baby so they don't pass on pertussis or other germs.

Get immunised if you are an adult in close contact with small children

A vaccine for adults is available. It is recommended:

- for both parents when planning a pregnancy, or as soon as the baby is born
- for adults working with young children, especially health-care and child-care workers.

If you are a close contact of someone with pertussis:

- Watch out for the symptoms. If symptoms develop, see your doctor.
- Some close contacts at high risk (e.g. children under 1 year, children not fully vaccinated, and women at the end of their pregnancy) and others who live or work with high-risk people may need to take antibiotics to prevent infection.

If you have pertussis:

- Get treated early while infectious, avoid other people and stay away from young children, e.g. at child-care centres, pre-school and school.

How is it diagnosed?

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

How is it treated?

A special antibiotic – usually azithromycin, erythromycin or clarithromycin is used to treat pertussis. These antibiotics can prevent the spread of the bacteria to other people.

Coughing often continues for many weeks despite treatment.

What is the public health response?

Doctors and laboratories must confidentially notify cases of pertussis to the local public health unit. Public health unit staff can advise on the best way to stop further spread.

Infectious children are restricted from going to pre-school and school. Unimmunised contacts may be excluded from child care unless they take the special antibiotics.

The factsheet is available at: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/infectious/pertussis.html>.