



# Whooping cough (pertussis)

## What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a highly infectious disease that can be a life threatening infection in babies.

Young infants infected with whooping cough may stop breathing or turn blue, have apnoea (pauses in normal breathing), pneumonia, feeding problems and weight loss, seizures, brain damage and, in some cases, death.

Older children and adults can also become infected with whooping cough and, while their symptoms are usually less severe, they can pass the infection to others, including infants too young to be immunised.

## What are the symptoms?

Whooping cough usually starts like a cold with a blocked or runny nose, tiredness, mild fever and cough.

The cough typically gets worse and severe bouts of uncontrollable coughing can develop.

Coughing bouts can be followed by vomiting, choking or taking a big gasping breath which causes a “whooping” sound. The cough can last for many weeks and can be worse at night.

Some newborns may not cough at all but they can stop breathing and turn blue. Some babies have difficulty feeding and can choke or gag.

Older children and adults may just have a cough that lasts for many weeks.

Not every person makes the whooping

sound – this is more common in non-immunised children.

The cough may last up to 3 months, but the person is no longer infectious after 21 days (3 weeks).

## How is it spread?

Whooping cough spreads by airborne droplets, that is, an infectious person coughs bacteria into the air which can then be inhaled by other people in close proximity.

Once a person is infected with whooping cough and starts experiencing symptoms they can be infectious to others unless they are treated early.

Without treatment people with whooping cough are infectious during the first 3 weeks of their illness and can infect others in their household, workplace, child care centre and school.

## Who is most at risk?

Whooping cough spreads easily through households and families, anyone can get whooping cough.

People living in the same household as someone infected with whooping cough are especially at risk of becoming infected, and young unimmunised children are at most risk of serious complications if they are infected.

Immunisation reduces the risk of infection but vaccine immunity fades over time, so you can still get whooping cough infection if you’ve been immunised.

## How is it prevented?

Whooping cough vaccines provide good protection from infection.

Immunity does fade over time however, which means that booster injections at specific ages are needed.



## Immunisation for pregnant women

It is recommended that pregnant women receive the whooping cough vaccine during the third trimester of pregnancy (between 28 and 32 weeks). However, the vaccine can be given at any time during the third trimester up to delivery.

Vaccination during pregnancy has shown to be more effective in reducing the risk of whooping cough in young infants than vaccinating the mother after the birth.

The whooping cough vaccine is delivered in one injection with diphtheria and tetanus (dTpa) and is safe and can be given to breast feeding mothers.

## Immunisation for babies

Babies need to be immunised at 6-8 weeks, 4 months and 6 months. Getting your baby vaccinated on time gives them some protection when they are most at risk of severe illness.

If your child's vaccines are overdue, see your GP now to complete their immunisation schedule.

## Immunisation for older children

A whooping cough booster can be given from 3.5 years of age.

A second whooping cough booster is offered in high school, generally through the year 8 school immunisation program.

Check if your child has been vaccinated. Check their immunisation book, speak to your GP or ring the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register on 1800 653 809 to check your child's record.

## Immunisation for adults

A booster for adults is recommended:

- If you have not had a pertussis vaccination in the past 10 years.
- For both parents when they are planning a pregnancy.
- For other adult household members, grandparents and carers of infants under 12 months of age.
- For adults working with young children, especially health care and child care workers.

## If you are a close contact of someone with whooping cough:

If you have been exposed to someone with whooping cough early in their illness while they are infectious, watch out for symptoms and see your doctor if you become unwell with a cough.

Some babies and some pregnant women may need antibiotics to prevent whooping cough infection if they have had significant contact with an infectious person.

## Minimise spread of infection

Whooping cough is spread by infected people coughing or sneezing. The following actions can help reduce the risk of infection spreading:

- Teach children about cough and sneeze etiquette e.g. cough or sneeze into your elbow rather than your hand
- If you used a tissue to cover your nose or mouth, place this in a closed bin after use
- Wash your hands.



## How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor may ask about your symptoms and whether you've had any contact with someone infected with whooping cough.

If your doctor thinks you have whooping cough, they will take a swab from the back of your nose and send it to the laboratory to confirm the diagnosis.

## How is it treated?

Young infants particularly those too young to have been immunised may need treatment in intensive care in hospital ; these infants are very vulnerable to infection and can die.

Antibiotics are used to treat whooping cough in the early stages of illness and can help prevent the spread of whooping cough infection to others.

People who are not treated early with the right antibiotics can spread the infection in the first 3 weeks of showing symptoms.

After 5 days of antibiotic treatment, people are normally no longer infectious, however, the cough often continues for many weeks, despite being treated with antibiotics.

## What is the public health response?

Whooping cough is a notifiable disease. This means doctors, hospitals and laboratories must confidentially notify confirmed cases to the local Public Health Unit. Public Health Unit staff can provide advice about the best way to stop further spread of infection.

Infectious children are restricted from going to pre-school and school.

Unimmunised contacts may be excluded from child care unless they take the recommended antibiotics.

## Where to get help

- See your doctor.
- Visit a GP after hours.
- Ring Healthdirect Australia on 1800 022 222.

## Remember

- Anyone can get whooping cough.
- Whooping cough is dangerous for babies and young children. It is important not to expose them to infection.
- Vaccination is the best way to prevent whooping cough. Make sure children are up-to-date with their vaccines.

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### Acknowledgements

Public Health

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## See also

- [Contact details for population/public health units](#)
- [About immunisation](#)
- [Childhood immunisation schedule](#)
- [Vaccination safety](#)
- [Pertussis vaccine in pregnancy – what expectant mothers need to know](#)

## Related sites

- [Immunise Australia \(external site\)](#)
- [Healthdirect Australia \(external site\)](#)



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Department of **Health**

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