

Whooping cough (pertussis)

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a highly infectious disease caused by infection of the respiratory tract with a bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*. It can affect babies, children and adults. Vaccination can prevent whooping cough.

The disease usually starts like a cold, with a runny nose, tiredness and sometimes a mild fever. Then a cough develops. Fits of coughing are often followed by vomiting. Often the person coughs in short bouts that may be followed by a deep gasp, or whoop. Not every person makes the whooping sound – this is more common in children who are not vaccinated. The cough can last up to 3 months.

Babies may stop breathing and sometimes turn blue during a coughing fit. About a quarter of children who catch the disease also develop a lung infection (pneumonia). Some children have fits (convulsions), and some develop swelling of the brain (encephalitis). Whooping cough is particularly serious in children under 12 months, and they often have to go to hospital if they catch it. Teenagers and adults may just have a persistent cough.

How it spreads

Whooping cough spreads from person to person via infected droplets in the air. People get infected by:

- breathing in droplets when an infected person breathes, coughs or sneezes on them
- touching a surface contaminated with droplets – for example, hands, tissues, toys or eating utensils – and then touching their face.

Vaccination against whooping cough is part of the routine childhood vaccination schedule in the Australian National Immunisation Program.

Exclusion period

Exclude until 5 days after starting antibiotic treatment, or for 21 days from the onset of coughing if they do not take antibiotics.

Contacts: Talk to your local public health unit for advice about excluding unvaccinated contacts.

Risks in pregnancy

If you catch whooping cough while you are pregnant, it can pass to the baby after birth and cause severe disease and even death. If you are 20 to 32 weeks pregnant, you can get a free vaccination under the Australian National Immunisation Program. For more, see pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/whooping-cough-and-pregnancy.

Actions for educators and other staff

Follow the exclusion period in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Contact your local public health unit for advice if you have a case of whooping cough in your service. In New South Wales and the Northern Territory, education and care services must notify their local public health unit about any cases of whooping cough in the service.

Review vaccination records of all staff and children and remind staff, parents and carers to keep vaccinations up to date.

Ensure staff and children have good hand and respiratory hygiene.

Ensure staff use appropriate cleaning practices, as described in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Actions for parents and carers

Make sure your child is fully immunised against whooping cough by keeping their childhood vaccinations up to date.

If your child has whooping cough, see your doctor straight away so they can treat your child with antibiotics.

Keep your child at home and away from other children for the exclusion period. Tell your friends and contacts that your child has whooping cough.

Teach your child to cough or sneeze into a tissue, then throw the tissue into a bin and wash their hands. If there are no tissues nearby, teach them to cough or sneeze into their inner elbow instead of their hands.

Make sure your child washes their hands thoroughly and often.

More information about whooping cough

See healthdirect for more information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of whooping cough (healthdirect.gov.au/whooping-cough).

To find out if a child needs medical help:

- use the online symptom checker (healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker)
- speak to a registered nurse by calling the 24-hour health advice hotline on 1800 022 222.