

# Pertussis – the facts

May 2015

## What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a highly contagious disease caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis* and is spread by coughing and sneezing. Whooping cough is very serious in infants under 6 months old. Older children and adults usually have a milder disease. **Anyone can contract whooping cough. Immunisation is the best means of protection and it reduces the risk of infection. Immunity fades over time. You can still get whooping cough if you have been immunised, however symptoms are likely to be less severe and not last as long.**

## What are the symptoms?

Initial symptoms begin like a cold with a blocked or runny nose, followed by a cough which gets worse over the following week. Symptoms include:

- Severe cough, which may develop into bouts of uncontrollable coughing.
- Whoop or gasping sound produced after breathing-in or between coughing bouts (this can sound like hiccups in young babies). This may not be present in every case
- Coughing until vomiting, gagging, or going red in the face
- Some babies may stop breathing for short periods or have difficulty breathing
- The cough can last for more than three weeks, sometimes months, and can be worse at night

## How long am I infectious to others for?

You can give whooping cough to someone else for 21 days from when you start getting sick (blocked/runny nose), or until you have taken at least the first five days of a course of the right antibiotics.

## What should I do if I think I, or my child, have whooping cough?

See your doctor and tell him/her of the symptoms. If possible take a video of your child during a bout of coughing and bring it to your doctor to help make the diagnosis. Inform your doctor if you, or your child, have been in contact with a confirmed case of whooping cough.

## What if my child has whooping cough?

If your child has whooping cough, they **should not attend school, pre-school, childcare or any setting where there are young children and infants** for 21 days from when they start getting sick (blocked/runny nose), or until they have taken at least the first five days of a course of the right antibiotics..

**Covering the mouth during coughing** and **hand washing** should be encouraged. If your child has been coughing for more than 21 days, they are no longer infectious and can go back to school or childcare. In these circumstances, antibiotic treatment is not usually needed as it does not make recovery any faster.

## What if I have whooping cough?

If you have whooping cough it is important to be mindful of your contact with others, **cover your mouth while coughing, wash your hands and avoid close contact with high-risk individuals or settings**. This means avoid women in their last month of pregnancy, children less than 6 months old, childcare centres, maternity wards and nurseries for 21 days from when you start getting sick or until you have received at least the first five days of a course of the right antibiotics.

## What if my child is not vaccinated?

**Children less than seven years of age** who have not received three doses of a whooping cough vaccine are at higher risk of contracting whooping cough. **If they were in the same room with a child diagnosed with whooping cough** they will need to be excluded from school, childcare centres, family day care, and any other children's services centres for 14 days after the last exposure, or until they have taken the first five days of a course of the right antibiotics. This exclusion is required by law under the Public Health and Wellbeing legislation.

## Immunisation for adults

Vaccination is recommended for any adult wishing to reduce the likelihood of getting whooping cough and to protect those in at risk groups:

- Women in the third trimester of every pregnancy should receive the vaccine to protect the newborn baby.
- Adult contacts who live in the same house and carers (e.g. fathers, grandparents) of children under 6 months old. Ideally 2 weeks before close contact with the child. A booster dose is recommended if 10 years have elapsed since a previous dose.
- All adults working with young children, especially healthcare and childcare workers. A booster dose is recommended if 10 years have passed since a previous dose.
- Adults should consider including the pertussis vaccine with their routine diphtheria/tetanus booster at 50 years of age.
- Adults from 65 years of age should consider a pertussis booster if they have not received one in the past 10 years.

## What if I have had contact with someone who has whooping cough?

Living in the same house and close contact is considered enough exposure to get whooping cough. Close contact is having been **within one metre for longer than one hour** with an infectious person.

Are you:

- a healthcare worker?
- a childcare worker?
- in your last month of pregnancy?
- in a household containing an infant less than 6 months of age?

### If you said YES to one of the above:

You are considered a high risk contact because you are likely to spread the disease to babies and adults in these settings if you become unwell. You should consult your doctor regarding preventative antibiotics as early as possible. **Antibiotics are not recommended in every situation. Antibiotic use is limited to high risk individuals and families that have had the types of contact described above.** If you are in your last month of pregnancy you should inform the maternity ward and your obstetrician/midwife as you may be at risk of infecting your own or other babies just after they are born if you get the disease.

**If you said NO to all of the above:**

If you've been exposed to whooping cough and become symptomatic **within three weeks** from last contact, please consult your doctor as early as possible. Your doctor will ask you about symptoms and may take a swab (cotton bud) from the back of your nose or throat or take a blood sample to confirm the diagnosis. **Antibiotics are recommended to treat early infection**, and will prevent the spread of the disease to others.

For further information, please contact Nurse on Call 1300 606 024

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Available at <http://ideas.health.vic.gov.au/diseases/pertussis-facts.asp>