

## Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Dear Parents, Caregivers and Staff,

The Loddon Mallee Public Health (LMPHU) has been notified of a recent case (or cases) of **whooping cough (pertussis)** at your Primary School. LMPHU is contacting you to provide the following advice:

- Please monitor for the symptoms of whooping cough in your child, especially over the next few weeks.
- If your child develops symptoms of whooping cough, please do not attend school and instead seek medical care.
- School exclusion applies to children aged less than seven years who are not fully vaccinated and were in the same room as a child diagnosed with whooping cough.

### What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (or pertussis) is caused by a type of bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis* and affects people of all ages. It can be especially serious for babies under 6 months of age who have not had the chance to have 3 doses of the whooping cough vaccine. Whooping cough is highly contagious respiratory infection and is spread by coughing and sneezing. People living in the same household as someone with whooping cough are especially at risk.

Whooping cough usually begins like a cold and then the characteristic cough develops, with bouts of uncontrollable coughing followed by vomiting, choking or taking a big gasping breath which causes a "whooping" sound. The illness can last for many weeks. People with whooping cough are considered infectious from the start of symptoms until 21 days after the onset of cough or until they have completed 5 days of a course of antibiotic treatment.

Vaccination reduces the risk of infection and severe disease. Immunity decreases over time, so it is important to be up to date with vaccines. Children and adolescents are vaccinated against whooping cough as part of the Australian Immunisation Program. Pregnant women should receive a whooping cough vaccine during each pregnancy. Adults can receive the whooping cough vaccine every 10 years.

### What you need to do:

#### **Monitor for symptoms**

- Please monitor your child for symptoms of whooping cough, particularly over the next few weeks. This includes:
- Initially symptoms similar to a cold with a blocked or runny nose, which then can rapidly progress
- A cough that gets worse over the following week and can be severe and occur in bouts
- 'Whooping' sound on inhalation
- Vomiting at the end of a bout of coughing
- Periods of apnoea – where your child stops breathing for periods of time and may go blue
- Note that older children and adults may not have the classical symptoms of whooping cough and may present with only a persistent cough
- Please also monitor for symptoms in your household, especially in siblings under 6 months of age or any women in late stages of pregnancy who can pass on the infection to newborn babies.

### What to do if your child develops symptoms of whooping cough

- If symptoms develop, please do not attend school and instead seek medical care. You can take this letter with you.
- A doctor can advise whether whooping cough is the likely diagnosis and arrange for early treatment if needed. Treating people who have whooping cough with antibiotics can stop the infection spreading and is more effective if started early.
- People with symptoms of whooping cough or who have been diagnosed with whooping cough should avoid contact with infants aged less than 6 months and women in the last month of pregnancy.

### Check your/your child's whooping cough vaccines

- Check that you are/your child is up-to-date with whooping cough (pertussis) vaccination. You can find your child's immunisation records on the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) – a national register that records vaccines given to people of all ages in Australia or contact your doctor or immunisation provider for your child's immunisation records (if you were vaccinated by them).
- Your child is considered immune if they have had three or more doses of pertussis vaccine. Even if they are considered immune, please monitor closely for symptoms as immunity can decrease over time.

### Can my child go to school?

- Children who have received three or more doses of pertussis vaccine can continue to go to school.
- Children aged seven years of age or older who have not received three doses of a whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine can continue to go to school.
- Children less than seven years of age who have not received three doses of a whooping cough (pertussis) 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 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.
- Children diagnosed with whooping cough must not attend school for 21 days after the onset of cough or until they have completed 5 days of a course of antibiotic treatment. This exclusion is required by law under the Public Health and Wellbeing legislation.

### Need more information?

For more information, please see [Whooping cough - Better Health Channel](#) and [Royal Children's Hospital –Information sheet](#)

We thank you for your cooperation in protecting the health and wellbeing of our community.

Sincerely,  
LMPHU Health Protection Branch