

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Information Sheet

What is it?

Whooping cough (also known as Pertussis) is an illness caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. Children are immunised to prevent illness from this bacteria.

Whooping cough is a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956. People suffering from the illness will be contacted by their local Communicable Disease Nurse or Health Protection Officer to try and establish the source of their illness, identify people they have been in close contact with, check their previous immunisations, and provide advice to reduce the chance of infection being spread to others.

How does a person become infected?

People become infected when they come into contact with discharges from the nose, throat and mouth of someone who is infectious with whooping cough. It is usually spread by coughing.

The illness is frequently brought home by an older child, or sometimes by an adult in the household. It is very infectious and with no immunity to the disease it is highly likely a person will become infected.

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

The illness usually takes 7 to 10 days for the symptoms to show after you have been exposed to the infection. The symptoms start with a runny nose, and an irritating cough. The cough becomes persistent and violent. Long, hard bouts of coughing are often followed by a 'whoop' (loud noise when trying to breathe in), breathlessness, or vomiting. Young babies are at risk of stopping breathing.

The cough can last up to two months or longer; the illness is frequently called the '100-day cough'.

Diagnosis can only be confirmed by nasal swab or a blood test arranged by a doctor.

How bad is it?

The illness is unpleasant and can be very serious in babies and young unimmunised children. The illness may lead to pneumonia, fits, coma and swelling of the brain, and in some cases death. Babies and young unimmunised children (<1 year old) are at highest risk of severe complications. Most deaths occur among unvaccinated children or children too young to be vaccinated under the age of 1 year.

For advice, testing and treatment, you will need to visit your doctor. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics for the case. The Public Health Unit may advise that household contacts have antibiotics if there are very young children living in the same household as a case of whooping cough.

Antibiotics usually do not improve the symptoms of whooping cough unless given very early in the illness.

A course of antibiotics is given to cases of whooping cough to reduce how infectious they are. This can then prevent further spread of the bacteria. Contacts given antibiotics must also finish a course (even if they have no symptoms) to reduce the chances of developing illness and causing further spread of the bacteria.

A case of whooping cough is infectious for three weeks from the first signs of the illness if they are not treated with antibiotics. If the case has had antibiotics, then he/she is considered infectious until 2 - 5 days after starting antibiotics (precise time depends on the antibiotic prescribed). The full course must still be completed to be fully effective.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Your Communicable Disease Nurse at your local Public Health Unit can give you advice on this.

- Children should not attend school or childcare for 21 days from the onset of coughing if they have not received antibiotic treatment. If antibiotics are taken, then they can return to school or childcare after 2 - 5 days of antibiotics have been taken.
- Early childhood centre workers, school teachers and healthcare workers in high-risk occupations should not attend work for 21 days from the onset of coughing if they have not received antibiotic treatment. If antibiotics are taken, then they can return to work after 2 - 5 days of antibiotics have been taken.
- Unimmunised children who are household contacts of a confirmed case should stay away from childcare until 2 - 5 days of antibiotic treatment or until 14 days after the case in their house was no longer considered infectious.

How do I avoid the illness?

This illness can usually be prevented by ensuring that children are fully vaccinated against Whooping Cough. This vaccine is part of the National Immunisation Schedule, with 4 doses being given between the age of 6 weeks and 4 years, and a booster at age 11yrs.

Adults with coughs should stay away from young babies and unvaccinated children.

For further information please contact:



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