

Whooping Cough (pertussis)

What is Whooping Cough?

Whooping cough affects people of all ages. It can be especially serious in babies. Vaccination reduces the risk of infection.

Whooping cough is an infection of the nose, throat and lungs caused by the germ *Bordetella pertussis*.

Whooping cough can be a life threatening infection in babies and can cause feeding problems, apnoea (pauses in normal breathing), pneumonia (infection of the lungs), seizures, brain damage and in some cases, death.

It is very important to keep people with coughing illnesses away from babies so they do not infect the baby with whooping cough or other germs.

What are the Symptoms?

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

Coughing can get worse. Severe bouts of uncontrollable coughing can be followed by vomiting, choking or taking a big gasping breath which causes a “whooping” sound.

The cough may last for many weeks and may be worse at night.

Newborn babies may get very sick.

They may stop breathing and turn blue.

Some have difficulty feeding and may choke or gag. Older children and adults may have a cough that lasts for many weeks.

If you have been vaccinated, symptoms may not be as serious.

How is it Spread?

Whooping cough is spread from infected people, usually during coughing or sneezing. It spreads most easily from infected people at the start of their illness.

Without treatment, a person can spread whooping cough during the first three weeks of coughing. With the right antibiotics, this time can be cut to five days.

Whooping cough spreads easily through families, childcare centres and at school.

The time from being in contact with the germ to when people get sick is about seven to 10 days, but can be up to three weeks.

How is it Diagnosed?

A doctor may ask about your illness and whether you have had contact with anyone who has had whooping cough.

The best test is a swab from the back of the nose or throat. The doctor may start medication before test results are back.

Testing centres and doctors must confidentially tell Public Health Services about whooping cough cases. Public Health clinical nurse consultants then give advice on how to stop it spreading further.

How is it Treated?

Some babies may need treatment in hospital.

Antibiotics, if given early, help to stop the spread of whooping cough to others.

The cough may continue for many weeks, despite antibiotics.

How is it Prevented?

Immunisation provides good protection against whooping cough but immunity fades, which means boosters are needed.

You can still get whooping cough even if you have a vaccine but the illness may not be as serious. Doctors and some [councils](#) provide immunisation.

Who should get immunised?

Whooping cough vaccine is provided free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) to:

- **babies and young children** from six weeks of age, then at four months, six months, 18 months and again at four years
- **older children** when they are in grade seven at school (this is a booster dose)
- **people 20 years and younger** who missed any of their childhood whooping cough vaccines
- **refugees and humanitarian entrants** of all ages
- **pregnant women.** A booster dose early in the third trimester is safe. This will help protect the baby in their first six weeks until they can have the vaccine. Vaccination is recommended in each pregnancy. See our [pregnant women fact sheet](#) for more information.

The vaccine for pregnant women is funded by the Tasmanian State Government but will become available on the NIP from July 2018.

Other adults who should think about getting a booster dose are:

- women who have just had a baby (if they were not given a booster in the third trimester)
- other people who live in the same house or who care for babies (fathers, grandparents as well as adoptive and foster parents), ideally at least two weeks before contact with the baby
- anyone who works in close contact with very young babies, such as childcare workers
- anyone having a tetanus booster, which can be given in the same injection with whooping cough vaccine
- anyone who is 65 or older if they have not had a booster in the last 10 years

- healthcare workers
- anyone who wants to reduce their risk of getting sick with whooping cough.

The vaccine is not free for these groups.

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

Watch for symptoms for the next three weeks. See your doctor if you develop symptoms.

People who have been in close contact with people with whooping cough are sometimes also given antibiotics. This helps to stop them from getting sick and from giving whooping cough to people who might get extremely sick if they catch it.

The people who should see a doctor quickly after they have been close to someone with whooping cough, even if they feel well are:

- children who are less than six months of age
- children who aren't fully immunised
- pregnant women (or their partner)
- people who live or work with babies.

What should I do if I have Whooping Cough?

- If you have whooping cough and are infectious, stay away from childcare, school or work. Also stay away from young children, pregnant women, and people not immunised against whooping cough. You should also try to stay away from people who live or work with babies or women in the last month of pregnancy.
- If you are being treated with antibiotics you need to stay away until you have finished a five day course of antibiotics.
- If you are not being treated with antibiotics, you need to stay away for three weeks from the start of symptoms.
- If you have a cough which may be whooping cough, see a doctor and stay away from the above places and people until you know what is causing your cough.

Call the Public Health Hotline – Tasmania on **1800 671 738** to speak to a clinical nurse consultant about whooping cough.

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