

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Fact sheet

Last updated 12th September 2024

Whooping cough affects people of all ages. It can be especially serious for babies. Vaccination reduces the risk of infection and severe illness. It is very important for pregnant women to be vaccinated during each pregnancy to protect the baby in its first months of life. Treatment for whooping cough is available.

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a serious respiratory infection. It is caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. It is also called pertussis.

Whooping cough is very infectious and spreads easily from one person to another. It affects people of all ages and can be life-threatening in babies. Children and adults generally don't get as sick, but can pass it on to babies who are at higher risk.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

- Whooping cough usually starts like a cold with a blocked or runny nose, sneezing, a mild fever and an occasional cough.
- The cough typically gets worse and severe bouts of uncontrollable coughing can develop. Coughing bouts can be followed by vomiting, choking or taking a big gasping breath which causes a "whooping" sound. The cough can last for many weeks and can be worse at night.
- Some babies may not cough at all, but they can stop breathing completely and turn blue. Other babies may have difficulties feeding and can choke or gag.
- Older children and adults may just have a cough that doesn't go away. In adults the cough commonly lasts 5-7 weeks, sometimes longer. They may not have the whoop.
- Some people will have milder symptoms, especially if they have been vaccinated.
- Symptoms usually appear about 7 to 10 days after contact with someone who has whooping cough.

Call **healthdirect** on **1800 022 222** if you or your child are unwell and you're not sure where to go. healthdirect is free and available 24 hours a day, 7 days. A nurse will answer your call, ask some questions and connect you with the right care.

Call Triple Zero (000) or go to a hospital emergency department immediately if your child has difficulty breathing or turns blue.

How is whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough is very infectious. It is spread in the air as droplets, usually by coughing or sneezing. This means it spreads easily from one person to another and through families, childcare centres and schools.

A person with whooping cough can pass it on to others as soon as they get cold-like symptoms. People are usually infectious for three weeks after their cough starts, **unless** they take antibiotics early in their illness.

Pregnant people who get whooping cough in the last month of pregnancy may also pass it onto their baby.

Who is at higher risk of severe illness from whooping cough?

- Newborns and premature infants are at greatest risk of severe illness, hospitalisation and death. These babies are too young to be fully vaccinated.
- This is why it is important for pregnant women to be vaccinated during each pregnancy - to protect the baby in its first months of life with antibodies from its mother before they can have their own vaccination.

How is whooping cough prevented?

The best protection against whooping cough infection is vaccination. This protection drops off over time which means boosters are needed.

Vaccination during pregnancy

A vaccine for pregnant women is available through GPs and hospital antenatal clinics during **each** pregnancy. This vaccine is free.

The whooping cough vaccine can be received any time between 20 and 32 weeks.

This vaccine is important as it also protects the baby until they can have their own vaccine.

Pregnant women who have not been vaccinated during pregnancy, should have the vaccine as soon as possible after giving birth. This will reduce their risk of getting whooping cough and spreading it to their baby.

Please see [protect your newborn from whooping cough](#) for further information.

Vaccination for babies

- Babies should be vaccinated at 6 weeks, 4 months, 6 months and 18 months of age.
- Vaccinating babies on time gives them the best protection while they are most at risk of serious illness.
- If your baby's vaccines are overdue, see your GP now to catch up.

Vaccination for older children

- A whooping cough vaccine dose is needed at 4 years of age.
- A dose is given to adolescents between 11 to 13 years of age in high school, through the [NSW School Vaccination Program](#). This dose is important because immunity declines over time.

Vaccination for adults

A whooping cough booster is recommended for:

- adult household members, grandparents and carers of infants under 6 months of age if they haven't had a pertussis vaccine in the last 10 years
- adults working with young children, especially healthcare and childcare workers, every 10 years
- adults at age 50 years and 65 years who have not had a pertussis vaccine in the last 10 years.

Accessing your vaccination record

- In Australia, vaccinations are recorded in the child's Blue Book and on the Australian Immunisation Register.
- For instructions on checking your vaccination record, see [Check immunisation history](#).

How is whooping cough diagnosed?

Your doctor may ask about you or your child's symptoms and whether there has been any contact with someone who has whooping cough.

If your doctor thinks you have whooping cough, a swab from the back of the nose or throat can confirm the diagnosis.

If you or your child have been in contact with someone who has whooping cough but do not have any symptoms, you do not need to get tested.

How is whooping cough treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat whooping cough in the early stages of the infection (the first 3 weeks) and can help prevent the spread to others. After 5 days of antibiotics, people are no longer infectious.

The cough often continues for many weeks, even if treated with antibiotics. Early treatment may make the illness less serious and will reduce how long people with whooping cough are infectious.

Some babies may need treatment in hospital. Some might require intensive care.

Older children do not usually have a life-threatening illness and rarely need treatment in hospital.

Adults generally do not require treatment in hospital. But some older people may develop pneumonia and people who smoke or have asthma may also require further treatment.

How can people with whooping cough reduce the risk of spreading it?

People who have been diagnosed with whooping cough should take these steps to help protect others:

- Stay at home. People with whooping cough should stay at home until 5 days after starting antibiotics. Those not taking antibiotics should stay home for 21 days from the beginning of your cough.
- Avoid contact with people at high risk of serious illness, including babies and pregnant women.
- People who have been in contact with pregnant women or babies, should tell them that they have whooping cough. Babies and pregnant women may need antibiotics to prevent an infection if they have had close contact with an infectious person.

Parents who have a child with whooping cough can help reduce the risk of it spreading through their household by:

- Keeping them away from other people as much as possible, particularly babies.
- Asking them to cover their mouth when coughing or sneezing, if possible.
- Disinfecting toys and objects they use while they are sick.
- Encouraging everyone in the household to practise good hygiene, including regular hand washing.

Anyone who has been in contact with someone who has whooping cough should monitor for symptoms and talk to their doctor if symptoms develop.

If you have concerns, please contact your doctor or call [healthdirect](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au) on **1800 022 222**.

What is the public health response to whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a notifiable disease in NSW.

Doctors, pathology providers and certain services, such as schools, childcare centres and aged care facilities, may need to inform their local public health unit of any cases of whooping cough.

This helps to identify outbreaks of whooping cough. It also means NSW Health can provide you and the community advice on how to stop the spread of whooping cough.

Information will remain confidential.