

Infectious Disease Factsheet

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Pertussis affects people of all ages, but can be very serious in babies. It can be prevented by immunisation at two, four and six months of age. Booster shots are needed for four-year-olds and teenagers, and adults living or working with small children.

Last updated: 30 January 2008

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (or whooping cough) is a disease caused by infection of the throat with the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*.

What are the symptoms?

- Pertussis usually begins just like a cold, with a runny nose, tiredness and sometimes a mild fever.
- Coughing then develops, usually in bouts, followed by a deep gasp (or "whoop"). Sometimes people vomit after coughing.
- Pertussis can be very serious in small children. They might go blue or stop breathing during coughing attacks and may need to go to the hospital.
- Older children and adults may have a less serious illness, with bouts of coughing that continue for many weeks regardless of treatment.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is spread to other people by droplets from coughing or sneezing. Untreated, a person with pertussis can spread it to other people for up to three weeks after onset of cough.

The time between exposure and getting sick is usually seven to ten days, but can be up to three weeks.

Who is at risk?

- Anyone can get pertussis.
- People living in the same household as someone with pertussis are more likely to catch it.
- Immunisation greatly reduces your risk of infection, but reinfection can occur.

How is it prevented?

Immunise your child on time

- The vaccine does not give lifelong protection against pertussis, and protection is sometimes incomplete.
- Children need to be immunised at two, four and six months.
- Boosters are needed at four years of age and again at 15 years of age.
- Immunisation is available through general practitioners and some local councils.

Keep your baby away from people who cough

- Babies need two or three vaccinations before they are protected. For this reason, it is very important to keep people with coughing illnesses away from your baby so they don't pass on pertussis or other germs.

Get immunised if you are an adult in close contact with small children

A vaccine for adults is available. It is recommended:

- For both parents when planning a pregnancy, or as soon as the baby is born
- For adults working with young children, especially health care and child care workers.

If you are a close contact of someone with pertussis:

- Watch out for the symptoms. If symptoms develop, see your doctor, take this factsheet with you and mention your contact with pertussis.
- Some close contacts at high risk (e.g., children under one year, children not fully vaccinated, and women at the end of their pregnancy) and others who live or work with high-risk people may need to take antibiotics to prevent infection.

If you have pertussis:

- Get treated early while infectious, avoid other people and stay away from young children, e.g., at child care centres, pre-school and school.

How is it diagnosed?

If a doctor thinks someone has pertussis, a swab from the back of the nose, or a blood test may be done to help confirm the diagnosis.

How is it treated?

A special antibiotic - usually either azithromycin, erythromycin or clarithromycin is used to treat pertussis. These antibiotics can prevent the spread of the germ to other people.

Coughing often continues for many weeks despite treatment.

What is the public health response?

Doctors and laboratories must confidentially notify cases of pertussis to the local Public Health Unit. Public Health Unit staff can advise on the best way to stop further spread.

Infectious children are restricted from going to pre-school and school. Unimmunised contacts may be excluded from child care unless they take the special antibiotics.

Further information - Public Health Units in NSW					
For more information please contact your doctor, local public health unit or community health centre - look under NSW Government at the front of the White Pages					
Metropolitan Areas	Location	Number	Rural Areas	Location	Number
Northern Sydney/Central Coast	Hornsby	02 9477 9400	Greater Southern	Goulburn	02 4824 1837
	Gosford	02 4349 4845		Albury	02 6080 8900
South Eastern Sydney/Illawarra	Randwick	02 9382 8333	Greater Western	Broken Hill	08 8080 1499
	Wollongong	02 4221 6700		Dubbo	02 6841 5569
Sydney South West	Camperdown	02 9515 9420		Bathurst	02 6339 5601
Sydney West	Penrith	02 4734 2022	Hunter/New England	Newcastle	02 4924 6477
	Parramatta	02 9840 3603		Tamworth	02 6767 8630
Justice Health Service	Matraville	02 9311 2707	North Coast	Port Macquarie	02 6588 2750
				Lismore	02 6620 7500