

## Whooping Cough

### Overview

Whooping cough, otherwise known as pertussis, is a bacterial infection of the windpipe. It causes severe bouts of cough that empty the lungs of air, creating a characteristic "whooping" noise when the person takes their first breath afterwards. Not everyone makes this noise - babies under six months and adults often don't. Sometimes the severe bout of coughing can cause vomiting or make the person turn blue due to lack of oxygen.

In this case urgent medical assistance should be sought. Dial 000 for an ambulance or go straight to the nearest hospital.

It is very infectious and in young infants, especially those under 12 months, and can be fatal or cause brain damage. One in 200 babies will die from it.

There is an effective vaccine and it is important that babies are vaccinated a 1 in 200 can die from it. Its protective effects, however, don't last into adulthood and a booster may be required. To protect children properly, not only should they be immunised but so should parents and other caregivers.

Whooping cough is sometimes called the 'hundred-day cough' as it lasts many weeks.

### Causes

Whooping cough is caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. It is spread in droplets from the mouth, nose, and throat when people cough or sneeze. The incubation period is 10-20 days and the infectious period is up to three weeks or until completion of a 10 day course of antibiotics.

### Symptoms

Generally there are three stages to whooping cough.

In the initial phase, about a week after being exposed to the whooping cough bacterium, those who are infected will develop what seems like a common cold. There may be some diarrhoea. This is when the person is most infectious.

Over the next week or two weeks, the coughing starts and gradually worsens. This is the second stage and it lasts up to six weeks. There is no or minimal fever at this stage.

The characteristic feature of whooping cough is the prolonged, severe coughing bouts. This may end in "whoop" but doesn't have to.

The bouts can be severe enough to cause:

- Vomiting,
- Choking,
- Stopping breathing,
- Turning blue,
- Blacking out,
- Seizures,
- And/or pinpoint bruises in the face.

Serious complications can occur in young children. For example, lack of oxygen can cause brain damage, or pneumonia can develop.

Coughing is often worse at night or following exposure to cold air.

In the third stage, the cough becomes less intense but it can persist for months. This is known as the convalescent stage.

Not everyone goes through all stages, especially if they have some immunity from past vaccination.

### Treatment

If started early, antibiotics - typically erythromycin - can reduce the amount of time a person with whooping cough is infectious, which helps protect people around them. However, they may not reduce the severity or the length of the illness.

Close contacts may also be given antibiotics and a booster vaccination.

Cough suppressants do not work and may not be safe for use in young children.

Babies with whooping cough may need to be in hospital to have their breathing monitored and to get liquids through a nasogastric tube or intravenous drip.

Prevention of whooping cough via vaccination is the best cure.

### Lifestyle and Diet

Immunisation is the best way to prevent whooping cough, especially in babies. Vaccinations are free and available from your GP for babies, and adolescents, parents, grandparents and carers of infants may also qualify for a free shot depending on which state they live in.

The vaccination for whooping cough also includes tetanus and diphtheria - two other potentially lethal conditions that children

should be immunised against.

While timetables may vary between states the vaccination should be given to babies at 2, 4, and 6 months of age, along with vaccinations for hepatitis B, polio and haemophilus influenzae type b.

At 4 and about 15 years (usually in year 10 at school) of age it is given again.

Parents and carers of small children may also be able to get the vaccination for free.

### Support & Online Services

Here are some additional support and resources:

- Children, Youth and Women's Health Service [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)
- The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne [www.rch.org.au](http://www.rch.org.au)

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