

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (also known as pertussis) is a highly infectious respiratory illness caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*.

Whooping cough can affect people at any age. Infants less than 6 months of age are most at risk of developing serious complications from the disease such as pneumonia, seizures and brain damage. Whooping cough can be life threatening for a young infant.

What are the symptoms?

Whooping cough usually begins like a cold with a runny nose, tiredness, a mild fever and a cough. Typically, people can go on to develop bouts of severe, uncontrollable coughing which may result in vomiting. A high-pitched “whooping” sound may also be heard when the person gasps for air while coughing. The cough typically lasts for two weeks or more.

In some cases, a mild but persistent cough may be the only symptom of whooping cough, particularly in older children and adults. Infants are also less likely to have the typical symptoms of whooping cough. They may not have a cough at all but may appear to be gagging and gasping for air. They are often unable to feed well and may become blue around the mouth.

How is whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough is easily spread to other people by droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread by direct contact with secretions from the nose or mouth of an infected person. It is most easily spread to those living in the same household or in close contact with the infected person.

It can take anywhere from 6 to 20 days (commonly 7 to 10 days) after coming in contact with pertussis for the disease to develop.

How long does a person remain infectious?

A person is infectious for as long as 21 days from when the cough first begins, or until they have completed 5 days of a course of appropriate antibiotics. The cough can continue for many weeks, despite antibiotics.

Individuals with whooping cough should be excluded from childcare facilities, school, work or settings where there are people at risk of infections, until they are no longer considered infectious.

Who is most at risk from whooping cough?

Anyone can get whooping cough. The majority of cases are in adults and adolescents. Parents, grandparents and others in close contact with infants such as healthcare providers and childcare workers are at risk of passing the infection to infants.

Infants less than 6 months of age who are too young to be fully vaccinated, account for the majority of hospitalisations and deaths from whooping cough.

What if I have been in contact with whooping cough?

If you or your child have been exposed to someone with whooping cough while they are infectious, watch out for symptoms and see your doctor if you develop a cough.

If you have a cough and your doctor suspects you have whooping cough, a swab from the back of the nose/ throat or a blood test can confirm the diagnosis.

Babies less than 6 months of age and those who are at risk of passing the infection on to them, who have had significant contact with an infectious person may benefit from a course of preventative antibiotics. Your GP can provide advice on whether you need a course of antibiotics.

Protection from whooping cough

Vaccination is the most effective way to avoid whooping cough infection. However, immunity does fade over time and it is still possible to get whooping cough even if you have been vaccinated in the past.

People with a coughing illness should avoid contact with infants less than 6 months of age and other people who may be vulnerable to illness.

Vaccination

Children and adolescents

Whooping cough vaccination is offered to all children as part of the funded National Immunisation Program. The first dose can be given from 6-8 weeks of age, followed by doses at 4 and 6 months and a booster dose at 3 ½ to 4 years of age. A further booster dose is given in high school through the school immunisation program in the ACT.

If your child has missed one or more of their vaccinations, please see your doctor to arrange a catch up.

Adults

An adult booster vaccine is available for purchase on private prescription from your doctor and is strongly recommended for anyone in contact with young infants, including health care workers, child care workers or anyone working or living with infants.

Any adult wishing to protect themselves against whooping cough should discuss vaccination with their doctor.

For those planning a pregnancy

The adult booster vaccine is recommended for those planning a pregnancy. It can be given before the pregnancy, during the third trimester of pregnancy or as soon as possible following the birth of the infant. Talk to your health care provider about vaccinations for pregnancy.

A booster may also be given if five years or more have passed between a previous booster dose and the expected date of birth.

Need more information?

For more information about whooping cough, contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2155**.

Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service is

responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Whooping cough (Pertussis) is a notifiable disease. Cases notified to ACT Health are investigated by Public Health Officers.

Acknowledgements

1. Heymann DL, 2008, *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 19th edition.
2. NHMRC, 2013, *The Australian Immunisation Handbook*, 10th edition.
3. Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing Pertussis SoNG 2013.

Accessibility

The ACT Government is committed to making its information, services, events and venues, accessible to as many people as possible.

- If you have difficulty reading a standard printed document and would like to receive this publication in an alternative format—such as large print or audio—please telephone 13 2281 or email HealthACT@act.gov.au.
- If English is not your first language and you require the translating and interpreting service—please telephone 131 450.
- If you are deaf or hearing impaired and require the TTY typewriter service—please telephone (02) 13 3677, then ask for 13 2281.
- Speak and listen users—phone 1300 555 727 then ask for 13 2281.
- Internet Relay Users—connect to the NRS, then ask for 13 2281.

© Australian Capital Territory, Canberra.

Updated May 2014

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the Territory Records Office, Community and Infrastructure Services, Territory and Municipal Services, ACT Government, GPO Box 158, Canberra City ACT 2601.

Enquiries about this publication should be directed to ACT Government Health Directorate, Communications and Marketing Unit, GPO Box 825 Canberra City ACT 2601 or email: HealthACT@act.gov.au

www.health.act.gov.au | www.act.gov.au

Enquiries: Canberra 13ACT1 or 132281