



Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Fact Sheet

Pertussis (*or whooping cough*) affects people of all ages, but it is most serious in infants, especially those under 6 months of age who are too young to be fully vaccinated. Immunisation is an effective way to protect people against pertussis, and it is particularly important that children receive all 5 scheduled doses of pertussis vaccine (at 2, 4 and 6 months of age, with booster doses at 4 years of age, and in Year 7 of primary school). In addition, it is recommended that adults who live or work with young children should have pertussis vaccine.

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (or whooping cough) is a disease caused by infection of the respiratory tract with the bacterium *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, which may occur in bouts, sometimes followed by a deep gasp (or “whoop”), especially in unvaccinated children. People may vomit after a bout of coughing.
- Pertussis can be very serious in young children, especially those under 6 months of age. Complications can include pneumonia, brain damage from lack of oxygen suffered during bouts of coughing, and death.
- Older children and adults tend to have a less serious illness, but they can still have persistent coughing that may continue for several 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 most likely to become infected.
- Immunisation greatly reduces the risk of infection, but immunity wanes over time, and infection may still occur.

How is it prevented?

- Make sure children are up-to-date with their pertussis vaccines.
- Children need to be immunised at 2, 4 and 6 months of age, but can start as early as six weeks during an outbreak of pertussis
- Booster doses of pertussis vaccine are recommended at 3 ½ to 4 years of age prior to school entry, and at 12 – 13 years (in the year 8 school-based program),
- Vaccination is also recommended for adults planning a pregnancy; parents of infants and other household carers, including grand-parents; and for adults who work with young children, including child-care workers and health-care workers.
- Immunisation is available through general practitioners; some local council immunisation clinics, community health immunisation centres and through the Year 8 school-based vaccination program.
- The vaccine does not give lifelong protection against pertussis, and protection is sometimes incomplete (not completed vaccination series).



Keep babies away from people who cough

Babies need to complete two or three doses of vaccine before they are protected. For this reason, it is very important to keep babies away from people with coughing illnesses to reduce the risk of them being infected.

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

A vaccine for adults is available but not funded. It is recommended for:

- both parents when planning a pregnancy, or as soon as possible after the baby is born
- grandparents and others who will have close contact with the baby
- adults working with young children, especially health-care and child-care workers

If you have pertussis:

- People diagnosed with pertussis should stay away from school and work while infectious (up to 21 days) or until they have completed 5 days of a course of a recommended antibiotic. It is particularly important not to expose young children (child care centres, pre-school) to infection.

How is pertussis diagnosed?

If a doctor considers that you could have pertussis infection, a swab from the back of the nose or throat, and/or a blood specimen may be collected to help confirm the diagnosis.

How is it treated?

A recommended antibiotic – usually azithromycin for 5 days, or erythromycin or clarithromycin for 7 days is used to treat pertussis. These antibiotics can prevent the spread of the infection to other people.

People often continue coughing for many weeks despite treatment, but they are no longer

infectious after 21 days, or after completing a five day course of antibiotics.

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 may then provide advice on the best way to prevent further spread of infection. This may include exclusion from child-care of well children who have not completed their course of pertussis vaccination or a recommended preventive antibiotic.

Further information – Public Health Units

Public Health Unit	Telephone/Fax No.
Kimberley (Broome)	Tel: 9194 1630 Fax: 9194 1633
Pilbara (Port Hedland)	Tel: 9158 9207 Fax: 9158 9253
Midwest (Geraldton)	Tel: 9956 1985 Fax: 9956 1991
Midwest (Carnarvon)	Tel: 9941 0515 Fax: 9941 0520
Goldfields (Kalgoorlie)	Tel: 9080 8200 Fax: 9080 8201
Wheat belt (Northam)	Tel: 9622 4320 Fax: 9622 4342
Southwest (Bunbury)	Tel: 9781 2350 Fax: 9781 2382
Great Southern (Albany)	Tel: 9842 7500 Fax: 9842 2643
North Metropolitan (Perth)	Tel: 9380 7700 Fax: 9380 7719
South Metropolitan (Perth)	Tel: 9431 0200 Fax: 9431 0223

Reference

Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing,
National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).
Australian Immunisation Handbook, 9th Edition 2008.

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