

Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

What is pertussis?

Pertussis is a highly infectious disease caused by bacteria, which is spread through the community by coughing and sneezing, in the same way as colds and influenza. Roughly every four to five years we experience an outbreak of many cases of pertussis – known as an epidemic. The last large pertussis epidemic occurred in 2017-2019.

Young children, especially babies under six months, can become extremely ill and occasionally die from pertussis. Older children and adults get pertussis too, which if not diagnosed and treated, may spread to young children.

What are the symptoms?

Pertussis starts with a runny nose and dry cough. The cough gets worse over the next few weeks, often developing into very long coughing attacks. In babies and children these coughing attacks often end with a 'whoop' sound when breathing in, or end with vomiting. Babies with pertussis can turn blue or stop breathing. If you think you or your child might have pertussis, see your family doctor without delay.

Immunity (protection) to pertussis decreases over time, so older children and adults can catch whooping cough and pass it on to babies and young children even if they have been immunised or had the infection before. It is important for children to get their booster immunisations at 4 and 11 years to keep their protection up during their school years.

What can be done to prevent pertussis?

Getting immunisations on time offers the best protection against pertussis.

It is now recommended that pregnant women get a pertussis booster in the last 10 weeks of pregnancy. This has been shown to be safe and effective at protecting their baby from getting pertussis. In babies, delays in being immunised increase the risk of being admitted to hospital with pertussis, so it is very important that immunisations are given on time.

To give your baby the best protection, pertussis immunisations should be given at the recommended times, that is:

- Six weeks
- Three months
- Five months

Boosters are then given at:

- 4 years
- 11 years

If for some reason your child has not completed the full course of immunisations, or you are not sure, see your doctor or practice nurse to discuss catch-up immunisations.

You can also check whether your child is up-to-date with immunisations by calling the National Immunisation Register on 09 638 0393 or 09 638 0394, or by checking in their Plunket (Well Child) book.

Other means of protecting babies and young children from pertussis

Pertussis is most severe in babies and young children, especially if they are too young to have completed their immunisations or have a weak immune system (immunocompromised). Things that can be done to protect other children include:

- Keeping babies away from people with a runny nose, coughing, or sneezing
- Asking people who are ill not to visit if you have young children
- Immunising adults and older children greatly decreases the chance of them getting pertussis and passing it on to babies and young children. Immunisation is recommended for:
 - Older children and adults in families with young babies or that are expecting a baby
 - Adults who care for babies or young children e.g. nurses, midwives, early childhood workers
- Adults who are parents or expecting a baby, or who care for babies, should discuss their options for immunisation with their doctor. Pertussis boosters are free for pregnant women.
- Treating people with whooping cough to stop it spreading through your family/whanau/community/ preschool/school

Treating people with whooping cough to stop it spreading

If someone in your family has had a cough that ends with a whoop or vomiting, or that has lasted for two weeks or more, they should see their doctor or nurse for advice. Adults often don't realise they have pertussis. In the early stages of infection with pertussis it can be difficult to work out what it is. A special nose swab or blood test may help in the diagnosis.

The correct antibiotic (usually azithromycin) may help prevent the infection spreading further. If there is a baby, a child who hasn't had all of their immunisations, a pregnant woman, or a person with a weak immune system in the family, your doctor may advise a course of antibiotics for everyone in the family in an attempt to protect them from being infected by other family members.

Should adults and children with pertussis, or who have been in contact with someone with pertussis, avoid contact with others?

Yes. People who have been diagnosed with pertussis or been in contact with someone with pertussis should avoid contact with people who may be susceptible to infection. This includes young babies, children who are not fully immunised, pregnant women, and people with a weakened immune system. If you are not sure if this means you, please ask your doctor.

They should stay away from daycare, kindy, kohanga reo or other preschool education, school, and community gatherings and also stay away from work (e.g. for adults) until one of the following has occurred, either:

- **2 days (48 hours) since treatment started if Azithromycin used as an antibiotic; or**
- **5 days since treatment started if Erythromycin used; or**
- **3 weeks from the start of cough if no antibiotic treatment is given to prevent them spreading the infection to others.**

If you suspect you or your child is sick with pertussis phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 or visit your doctor. For more information on immunisation, please call the Immunisation Advisory Centre for free on 0800 IMMUNE (0800 466 863) or visit their website www.immune.org.nz

For further information, contact Auckland Regional Public Health Service on 09 623 4600

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