

# Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

## Community and Public Health

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Pertussis is an infectious disease of the airways caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*. It can affect persons of any age but is particularly serious and occasionally life-threatening for children aged under 1 year, especially those under 3 months.

Complications include pneumonia, seizures, brain damage and weight loss. Pertussis develops within 6 to 20 days (usually 9-10 days) of exposure to the disease.

### What are the symptoms?

Pertussis often begins with the same symptoms as a "cold", followed within days by an irritating, persistent cough which gets worse and may last for several weeks. Bouts of coughing result in breathlessness which causes the characteristic "whoop" on breathing in. This may be associated with vomiting. Adults and infants may not have the "whoop".

Diagnosis can be confirmed by a swab of the back of the nose.

### How is it caught or spread?

Pertussis is caught from droplets produced by coughing or sneezing. A person is infectious for 3 to 4 weeks from the onset of the first symptoms.

### How is it treated?

An antibiotic can reduce symptoms and shorten the infectious period, if given early.

If pertussis is suspected, the person should be seen by a doctor and kept away from others, especially:

- children under 1 year of age,
- women in the late stage of pregnancy,
- people attending preschool, and
- anyone who is vulnerable, such as someone with lung or heart disease who is likely to have a more serious illness if infected.

The affected person should be off work, school or preschool until he/she has taken 5 days of a course of antibiotics. If the antibiotic is not taken, the person should be kept away from others for three weeks from the onset of the cough.

A doctor can advise about treatment of symptoms.

### Can it be prevented?

Up-to-date immunisation is the most effective means of preventing the disease and controlling it in all settings. Childhood vaccinations are free.

If immunised children do happen to develop pertussis it is usually not as severe.

An immunisation booster is recommended for adults who have contact with those who are most vulnerable. This includes midwives and other health care workers, preschool workers, pregnant women, and those in a household where a new-born infant is expected.

### How is it treated?

A course of antibiotics may be given to contacts who would be at risk of spreading the illness to either under 1 year olds or others who are likely to have a more serious illness if infected, in the following situations:

- Members in a household or preschool group that have a child/children aged under 1 year
- All members in a household with an infected person, where there is a woman in the late stage of pregnancy
- Midwives and other healthcare or preschool workers.