

Whooping cough (Pertussis)

What is it?

Whooping cough is a bacterial infection, which affects the respiratory system. It is also known as the '100 day cough' because of the long course of the illness.

What are the symptoms?

Whooping cough usually starts with a runny nose and irritating cough lasting 1-2 weeks. This then develops into fits of coughing, which may end with vomiting, or with a 'whooping' sound.

Complications can include pneumonia, ear infections, and symptoms related to the effects of coughing. It can be particularly serious in children under one year of age who are more at risk of serious complications including in very severe cases brain damage and death.

Can adults get whooping cough?

Adults and older children can also get whooping cough. Sometimes they do not get the classical symptoms of cough with whoop, but instead a persistent cough which can be worse at night.

How does it spread?

Whooping cough spreads when someone with the illness coughs or sneezes, spraying droplets of fluid from the nose or throat.

Infectious period

A person is most infectious in the early stage of runny nose and irritating cough. Without treatment they continue to be infectious until three weeks after the start of the fits of coughing.

Antibiotics shorten the infectious period to 2 days if azithromycin is used, or 5 days for other appropriate antibiotics.

Vaccination

Regional Public Health advises all parents to ensure that their children are fully immunised against this disease. The immunisation is normally given at 6 weeks, 3 months, 5 months and a booster at 4 and 11 years of age.

Immunisation is free to all children and pregnant women to prevent whooping cough (Boostrix).

- The vaccine is recommended and free for pregnant women between 28-38 weeks of pregnancy. The vaccine provides protection to the mother, and some protection to the baby.
- Boostrix vaccine is recommended but not funded for: Early Child Care workers, health professionals that work with young children or work in high risk areas and families of new born babies.

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Can fully vaccinated children get whooping cough?

Yes, when there is a high level of infection in the community even fully vaccinated children can get whooping cough as the vaccines are effective in preventing illness in more than 80% of people.

Vaccinated children may get a milder infection. To stop whooping cough circulating in the community we need a very high level of vaccination.