

PERTUSSIS (WHOOPIING COUGH) FACT SHEET



ABOUT

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a highly contagious respiratory infection that can be mild in adults but is life-threatening for young infants.

The bacteria (*bordetella pertussis*) attach to the cilia (tiny, hair-like extensions) and release toxins (poisons) which damage the cilia and cause airways to swell.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Symptoms will start to appear from 1–3 weeks after exposure to the bacteria.

The disease begins like a cold with a runny nose, mild fever, and a cough (which gets worse and can last 1–2 months or longer).

A thick, sticky mucus develops in the windpipe making it difficult to eat, drink and breathe.

In babies, coughing fits are often accompanied by a 'whoop' as they struggle to catch their breath. Older children and adults may just have a dry, persistent cough often without the 'whoop', so many cases are often mistaken for a bad chest cold or bronchitis.

Severe complications, which occur almost exclusively in unvaccinated people, include pneumonia (lung infection), hypoxic encephalopathy (lack of oxygen to the brain) and death.

If you experience these symptoms, contact your GP or HCP.

HOW IT SPREADS

If you catch it, there is an 80% chance that other members of your household will catch it too.

It is easily spread from person-to-person via droplets from close contact i.e. when you talk, sneeze, cough or kiss.

People with pertussis are most infectious in the first 3 weeks after the onset of symptoms.

PREVENTION & TREATMENT

Vaccination is the only form of prevention.

Children are eligible for a whooping cough vaccination under the [National Immunisation Program](#) (NIP).

Antibiotics may be given to prevent the spread of pertussis to other people.

If the patient has been coughing for more than 3 weeks, they are no longer infectious. In these cases, antibiotics are usually not needed.

For further information on available pertussis-specific preventative treatment options, contact your GP or HCP.

