

# PERTUSSIS (Whooping cough)

## WHAT IS PERTUSSIS?

Pertussis - also known as whooping cough - is a highly contagious disease caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. Whooping cough is spread by coughing and sneezing. It can be a life-threatening infection in babies, especially those under six months of age. Older children and adults who have not received whooping cough vaccination are at risk of infection and often the source of infection in babies. Whooping cough has a characteristic cough, which is followed by a 'whooping' sound. Immunisation is the best way to reduce the risk of whooping cough.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PERTUSSIS?

- Usually begins with cold like symptoms including a blocked or runny nose, tiredness, mild fever, and cough.
- The cough gets worse and uncontrollable coughing episodes can develop. These coughing episodes can be followed by vomiting, choking, or taking a big gasping breath which causes a "whooping" sound. The cough may last up to 3 months even after antibiotic treatment is complete and the person is no longer infectious. The cough can be worse at night.
- Some newborns may not cough at all, but they can stop breathing and turn blue. Some babies have difficulties feeding and can choke or gag.
- Older children and adults may just have a cough that lasts for many weeks. They may not have the whoop.

## HOW IS PERTUSSIS SPREAD?

Pertussis is spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes and the bacteria are spread via airborne droplets that other people breathe in. You can also become infected through direct contact with discharges from the nose or throat of an infected person. The time from infection to appearance of symptoms (incubation period) is between six and 20 days.

You are more likely to get pertussis if you are in close contact with someone who has the disease. Pertussis often spreads among family members, in schools and in other situations where there is very close contact between people.

## WHEN IS PERTUSSIS CONTAGIOUS?

- Pertussis is contagious in the early stage before the coughing spells develop, and for 3 weeks or 21 days after the cough begins or until they have had 5 days of a 10-day course of antibiotics.
- Children with pertussis should not attend school or childcare until 5 days after the start of antibiotic treatment.

# PERTUSSIS (Whooping cough)

## WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF GETTING PERTUSSIS?

- Babies under 6 months old because they are not fully vaccinated yet — this risk period is longer if the six-month vaccines are not given on time
- People who have not been vaccinated against pertussis
- People who have not received a pertussis booster vaccine in the past 10 years
- People living in the same house as someone with pertussis
- Pregnant women who become ill with pertussis in their 3rd trimester (particularly during the last 3 weeks of pregnancy) are at risk of passing the illness onto their baby after it is born.

## WHAT HAPPENS IF I CATCH PERTUSSIS?

Pertussis spreads very easily so people with the disease are required to stay home to reduce the risk of passing it on to others. People are required to stay home for up to 3 weeks from when their coughing started. If they take antibiotic treatments this time can reduce to around 5 days.

Staying home means you need to stay away from other people while you are contagious. You should avoid places such as childcare centres, health services, school, work or anywhere you could risk passing on the disease to others.

If you have pertussis, you can reduce the risk of passing on the disease while you are contagious by:

- Staying away from others, including people you live with where possible
- Wearing a face mask when around other people or indoors
- Coughing into your elbow and sneezing into a tissue
- Seeing your GP to promptly start a course of antibiotics
- Regularly washing your hands If there are people in your household at higher risk of becoming very unwell from whooping cough, then everyone you live may be provided with antibiotics.

## HOW CAN I AVOID GETTING PERTUSSIS?

Immunisation is the best way to prevent pertussis. Pertussis vaccine is recommended for all babies at six weeks, four months, six months, 18 months and at four years. An adult pertussis booster dose is then given at 12–13 years (in Year 7 at secondary school).

All babies less than six months old are at risk of catching pertussis because they have not completed the three-dose primary vaccine course.

Protection against pertussis can last for up to 10 years after a booster dose. A booster dose of adult pertussis vaccine is recommended for all parents of newborns. Grandparents and other carers in contact with children who are less than six months old should also have an adult pertussis booster, even if they have been infected with it in the past. The vaccine takes about 2 weeks for immunity to develop after vaccination.

# PERTUSSIS (Whooping cough)

Pregnant women are recommended to have a pertussis vaccine to protect their baby from developing whooping cough in the first few weeks of life. Vaccination is recommended in the third trimester (at 28 to 32 weeks).

All parents should check their child's immunisations are up to date and ask their GP to catch up on any missed doses.

## IS THE PERTUSSIS VACCINE FREE?

In Victoria, immunisation against pertussis is free for:

- Children at 2 (from 6 weeks), 4 and 6 months of age – in the form of a diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, hepatitis B, polio, and Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) vaccine (six-in-one vaccine)
- Children at 18 months of age – in the form of a diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine (three-in-one vaccine)
- Children at 4 years of age – in the form of a diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis and polio vaccine (four-in-one vaccine)
- Adolescents in Year 7 at secondary school (or age equivalent) – adolescents receive a booster dose of diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine (three-in-one vaccine). The dose can also be given by a doctor or at a council community immunisation session
- Pregnant women from 20 weeks gestation – during every pregnancy, from 20 weeks gestation, pregnant women receive a dose of diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine (three-in-one vaccine).

Free catch-up immunisations are also available in Victoria for people who have not been fully vaccinated, including:

- All people aged up to 19 years;
- Refugees and other humanitarian entrants aged 20 years and over; and
- Others who may be at risk of severe disease if infected with pertussis.

If you are not sure whether you are eligible for immunisation against pertussis that is free of charge, ask your vaccination provider. You can find local immunisation services provided by your local council here: <https://portal.cirv.vic.gov.au/communityvaccinationappointment>

## WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I GET PERTUSSIS? / WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH RESPONSE?

Pertussis is a notifiable condition in Victoria. The Gippsland Region Public Health Unit will be notified of cases within the Gippsland region and all information is confidential. Gippsland Region Public Health Unit is part of the Victorian Public Health Network and uses local knowledge, community-based relationships and direct engagement to effectively tailor and deliver public health initiatives and respond to incidents and issues within the Gippsland area.

[Whooping cough - Better Health Channel](#)