

Fact Sheet

Whooping cough



What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is an infection caused by a bacterium called *Bordetella pertussis*. Pertussis (which means 'forceful cough') is another name for whooping cough.

Is whooping cough dangerous?

In babies less than six months of age, and occasionally in older children, it can be very dangerous. In Australia, one baby dies about every two years from whooping cough, and more are left brain damaged by the infection. In older children, whooping cough is not usually life threatening. However, it causes a very nasty cough that often lasts many weeks - the Chinese call it the 100-day cough. Children with whooping cough can't stop coughing and can't catch their breath. At the end of the bout, when they gasp or whoop, they may go blue, and often vomit from coughing. They can wake several times a night with the cough, so the whole family gets very little sleep. The forceful coughing can often cause scleral (whites of the eye) bleeding (haemorrhages).

How do you catch whooping cough?

Whooping cough is caught by being coughed on by someone with the infection, often an older child or adult who does not know they are infected. If everyone has been immunised in the last few years there is little whooping cough around, but if immunisation uptake is low then there is a high risk of catching the infection. Most babies catch whooping cough from a school-aged child, often a brother or sister, but adults can catch whooping cough, and can infect babies, children and other adults.

Can whooping cough be prevented?

Immunisation is the best way of preventing whooping cough or making it less severe.

It is given to babies from two months of age, and starts to protect after the second dose, given at four months. If everyone is immunised, then there is very little whooping cough. An antibiotic, erythromycin or clarithromycin, is given to family members in contact with someone with whooping cough, as well as to the patient, but this is a much less efficient way of preventing spread than immunisation.

Is whooping cough vaccine dangerous?

Whooping cough vaccine has side effects, but these are mostly minor (fever, irritability, soreness and swelling at the site of the injection) and virtually never dangerous.

Does the vaccine always work?

No vaccine is 100 per cent effective. The whooping cough vaccine works best when there is little whooping cough circulating in the community. Even when there is a lot of whooping cough around, immunised children are less likely to catch it. If an immunised child does catch whooping cough, the illness is almost always milder than it is in children who have not been immunised.

How do I get my child immunised?

A vaccine to protect your child against whooping cough can be given by your family doctor, at a local child health clinic or in the emergency department of this hospital. There is also a vaccine to prevent adolescents and adults from getting whooping cough.

Remember

- To check your child's immunisation is up to date.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for your child.

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