What is Pertussis?

Pertussis (also known as whooping cough) is a highly contagious disease caused by the bacterium Bordetella pertussis. Pertussis is particularly serious in babies, especially those under 6 months of age. They are most at risk of developing serious complications from the disease.

What are the symptoms?

Pertussis usually begins like a normal cold with a runny nose, tiredness, a fever, or the person may simply begin coughing. Bouts of severe, repetitive coughing often occur followed by a big deep gasp after each bout which causes the whooping sound. Some people who have partial immunity from either previous pertussis infection or vaccination may have a milder form of the disease. Sometimes, a low grade but persistent cough may be the only symptom of pertussis.

How is it spread?

Pertussis is easily spread to other people by droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also be spread by direct contact with secretions from the nose or mouth of an infected person.

How long does a person remain infectious?

A person is infectious for as long as 21 days from when the cough begins, or until they have completed 5 days of a course of appropriate antibiotics. Individuals with pertussis should be excluded from childcare facilities, school and work until they are no longer considered infectious. The cough often continues for many weeks, despite antibiotics.

What about others who may have been in contact with someone who has pertussis?

Some people who have had close contact with an infected person may need to take antibiotics to prevent infection. This includes people at high risk of serious complications (e.g. children aged less than 1 year who are not fully vaccinated and women near the end of their pregnancy) and others who live or work with people at risk.

It can take anywhere from 6 to 20 days (commonly 7 to 10 days) after coming in contact with pertussis for the disease to develop. If your doctor suspects you have pertussis, a swab from the back of the nose/throat or a blood test can confirm the diagnosis. If you think you or your child may have pertussis, please consult your doctor as soon as possible.

Protection against Pertussis

Immunisation remains the most effective way to avoid pertussis infection. Pertussis vaccination is offered to all children as part of the funded National Immunisation Program. It is recommended that babies receive pertussis vaccination at 2, 4 and 6 months. The first dose can be given as early as 6 weeks of age. A booster dose is required from 3 ½ to 4 years of age.

If your child has missed one or more of their immunisations, please see your doctor to arrange a catch up vaccination.

It is important to note that immunity to pertussis from vaccination or natural infection fades over time and is not life long. It is still possible to get pertussis even if you’ve been immunised.

A booster vaccine is available for adults and older children. Adolescents in the ACT...
have been offered this vaccine as part of the funded school based vaccination program in Year 9 since January 2004. Otherwise, the vaccine can be purchased on private prescription.

The adult pertussis booster vaccine is recommended for:

- Women planning a pregnancy or as soon as possible after the birth.
- People working with or caring for very young babies, especially health care workers and child care workers.
- Any adult wishing to protect themselves against pertussis.

If there is a baby in your family, make sure no one with a coughing illness visits the baby.

**Need more information?**

For more information about pertussis, contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on (02) 6205 2155.

**Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service** is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

*Pertussis is a notifiable disease. Cases notified to the Health Directorate, ACT Government are investigated by Public Health Officers.*

**Acknowledgements**


**Accessibility**

The ACT Government is committed to making its information, services, events and venues, accessible to as many people as possible.

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