Whooping Cough

Whooping cough affects people of all ages, but can be very serious in babies.

What is whooping cough (pertussis)?
Whooping cough (or pertussis) is a disease caused by infection of the throat with the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*.

What is the risk of transmission?
Anyone can get whooping cough. People living in the same household as someone with whooping cough are more likely to catch it. Immunisation greatly reduces the risk of infection, but re-infection can occur.

What treatment is available?
A specific antibiotic is taken for seven days to treat whooping cough. These antibiotics can prevent the spread of the germ to other people. However, coughing often continues for many weeks despite treatment.

If you have whooping cough get treated early. While infectious, avoid other people and stay away from young children (for example, at child care centres, pre-school and school).

How is whooping cough (pertussis) spread?
Whooping cough is spread to other people by droplets from coughing or sneezing. If untreated, a person with whooping cough can spread it to other people for up to three weeks after the onset of a cough. The time between exposure and getting sick is usually 7-10 days, but can be up to 3 weeks.

What are the signs and symptoms of infection?
Whooping cough usually begins just like a cold, with a runny nose, tiredness and sometimes a mild fever. Coughing then develops, usually in bouts, followed by a deep gasp (or “whoop”). Sometimes people vomit after coughing.

Whooping cough can be very serious in small children. They might go blue or stop breathing during coughing attacks and may need to go to hospital. Older children and adults may have a less serious illness, with bouts of coughing that continue for many weeks regardless of treatment.

What precautions can I take?
Ensure the mouth and nose are covered with a mask when in contact with a person with whooping cough. Wear gloves when in contact with a person with whooping cough and when disposing of used tissues.

How can you prevent contracting whooping cough?

Immunise your child on time: Immunisation is available through your general practitioner. The vaccine does not give lifelong protection. Children need to be immunised at 2, 4 and 6 months. Boosters are needed at 4 years of age and again at 15 years of age.

Keep your baby away from people who cough: Babies need two or three vaccinations before they are protected. For this reason it is very important to keep people with coughing illnesses away from your baby so they don’t pass on whooping cough or other germs.

Get immunised if you are an adult in close contact with small children: It is recommended that when planning a pregnancy, or as soon as a baby is born that both parents get immunised. It is also recommended that adults working with young children get immunised.

If you are a close contact of someone with whooping cough, watch out for the symptoms. If symptoms develop, see your doctor: Some close contacts at high risk (for example, children under one year, children not fully vaccinated, women at the end of their pregnancy, and others who live or work with high-risk people) may need to take antibiotics to prevent infection.

Further information
For more information contact your general practitioner or the NSW Health Department on (02) 9391 9000.

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