

# Whooping cough (pertussis)

## Information for parents and caregivers

### What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough or pertussis is a highly contagious bacterial infection spread by coughing and sneezing. It can cause severe coughing attacks, vomiting and serious complications, like pneumonia. It is particularly severe in babies and young children. Babies can become very ill and may not be able to feed or breathe properly. Many need to be hospitalised. Whooping cough can last up to three months and is sometimes called the 100-day cough. Many babies catch it from their older siblings or parents – often before they are old enough to be vaccinated.

### What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

Whooping cough is most infectious in the first couple of weeks, when symptoms include a runny nose, sneezing, slight fever and a mild irritating cough.

The next 'coughing' stage usually lasts anywhere from one to ten weeks. This is when babies and children get coughing attacks followed by a big breath in or high-pitched 'whoop'. Adults generally do not get the characteristic 'whoop' sound. Infants and young children often become very ill and may vomit with coughing bouts.

It can take several months to fully recover. Although the cough eventually disappears after several weeks, coughing attacks may recur with any subsequent chest infections.

### Why are people talking about a whooping cough epidemic?

New Zealand could be facing a whooping cough epidemic later in 2009 or 2010, based on a recent rise in the number of notified cases and the pattern of previous epidemics. New Zealand gets a surge of whooping cough cases every three to four years. During the last epidemic in 2004/2005, there were more than 6000 notified cases and one death. Australia already has a whooping cough epidemic. In New South Wales alone in 2009, thousands of whooping cough cases have been notified and one baby has died.



### How do I protect my baby from whooping cough?

There are some steps you can take to help protect your baby from whooping cough and stop this disease spreading:

- **Immunise your baby on time**  
Babies need to be immunised at six weeks and three and five months of age – they are not protected from whooping cough until they have had all three doses.
- **Make sure older children are up to date with their immunisations**  
Children need booster doses at four and eleven years of age.
- **If your baby is sick, take them to a doctor**  
Babies who get whooping cough can become very ill. Many need to be hospitalised.
- **Keep your baby away from anyone with a cough**  
Babies can catch whooping cough from sick adults and children.
- **Never cough on babies**  
Whooping cough is highly infectious and is spread by coughing and sneezing.
- **If you have a cough that won't go away, see your doctor**  
Protection wanes over time. You might have whooping cough even if you have been immunised or have previously had the disease.
- **If you are sick, don't pass it on**  
Cover your cough, use tissues, wash and dry your hands after coughing or sneezing and stay away from babies.

### Can adults and older children get whooping cough?

Yes. Whooping cough can make adults and older children sick with coughing attacks, vomiting and complications like pneumonia. It can take several months to fully recover.

## What should I do if I think someone in my family has whooping cough?

If you think you, your baby or someone else in your family has whooping cough, see your doctor. Try not to pass it on. Cover your cough, use tissues, wash and dry your hands after coughing or sneezing, stay away from others, especially babies.

## How is it diagnosed and treated?

Doctors can do a test if they suspect whooping cough. If confirmed, antibiotics may be given to the patient and close family members to protect them, and others, from infection.

## What is the whooping cough vaccine?

The whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine used in New Zealand is given as an injection in combination with other vaccines: diphtheria, tetanus, polio, hepatitis B and Hib. The vaccines used in New Zealand are called INFANRIX®-hexa, INFANRIX-IPV® and Boostrix™. If you would like more information, please go to the Immunisation Advisory Centre website <http://www.immune.org.nz/?t=595>

## Is the vaccine effective?

Immunisation on time is one of the best ways to protect babies, who are most at risk from the serious complications caused by this disease. About 84 percent of babies are protected once they have completed three doses of vaccine at six weeks and three and five months of age. The vaccine protection usually starts to wane after six years, so it is important that four- and eleven-year-olds get booster immunisations.

## Who should get the vaccine?

The vaccine is free for all infants aged six weeks and three and five months, with booster doses given free of charge to children at four and eleven years. Immunisation is recommended, but not funded, for health professionals working closely with infants and for staff of early childhood services.

## Who shouldn't get the vaccine?

If you or your child have had a serious reaction to a vaccine, you must check with your family doctor or practice nurse before getting an immunisation. For more information about reactions, please go to the Immunisation Advisory Centre website <http://www.immune.org.nz/?t=595>

## What are some reactions to the vaccine?

Some common reactions include:

- localised pain, redness and swelling around the injection site
- a slight temperature (fever)
- large swelling at the injection site after booster doses; however, this is not painful and usually gets better after a few days.

Serious reactions following immunisation are rare. If you are worried about your child, call your family doctor or practice nurse.

## Why is it so important to get the whooping cough immunisations on time?

Babies under the age of one are at the highest risk of serious complications if they get whooping cough. Babies are not protected from this disease until they have had all three doses of whooping cough vaccine at six weeks and three and five months of age. Immunity from both the disease and the vaccine wanes over time, so booster doses are needed at four and eleven years.

## What do I do if my baby or child is behind with their immunisations?

Talk to your family doctor or practice nurse. It is never too late to catch up. They can arrange a time for your baby or child to get the immunisations they need to be protected from diseases like whooping cough.

## Do I have to immunise my baby?

No, but it is highly recommended that you do. Immunisation is a proven way of protecting babies, children and adults from diseases that can cause serious illness and long-term complications.

It is important that you make an informed choice about whether or not to immunise your child and get all the information you need to make that decision. If you have questions or concerns about immunisation, you can:

- talk to your family doctor or practice nurse
- call the Immunisation Advisory Centre toll-free advisory line 0800 IMMUNE or 0800 466 863
- go to the Immunisation Advisory Centre website <http://www.immune.org.nz> or the Ministry of Health website <http://www.moh.govt.nz/immunisation>

