

# Pertussis (whooping cough)

## What is Pertussis?

Pertussis, commonly known as 'whooping cough' is a highly contagious disease of the respiratory tract (nose and throat) caused by the bacteria *Bordetella pertussis*.

## How is it spread?

The bacteria are found in respiratory secretions of infected people and are passed to other people by coughing or sneezing. Pertussis can also be spread by direct contact with infected mouth or nose secretions e.g. by sharing eating utensils during a meal, sharing food or kissing. It can spread to others in the first 3 weeks of illness. It is important to seek the appropriate antibiotic treatment as quickly as possible once whooping cough is suspected to stop further spread.

## Who is at risk?

Pertussis can affect any age group but the most serious disease including hospitalisations and deaths occurs in infants younger than six months, who have not received the required number of vaccines to protect them. Pneumonia is a common complication of pertussis in infants and may be associated with seizures and prolonged decreased oxygen to the brain causing brain damage and life threatening complications.

## Signs and symptoms

The symptoms generally develop 7 to 10 days after exposure, but may take up to 20 days.

Pertussis is a coughing illness that often starts with cold-like symptoms (runny nose, sneezing, low grade fever) and an irritating cough. The cough gradually changes over 1-2 weeks into uncontrollable coughing bouts and can be followed by dry retching or vomiting.

In some people, particularly children, their cough may end with a whooping noise as air is drawn back into the chest and the child may vomit or gag. Very young babies are less likely to have the 'whoop' and are more likely to gag, gasp or they may hold their breath and turn blue.

Adolescents and adults may only have a persistent cough. The cough can linger for weeks and be worse at night.

## Infectious period

A person is infectious from the start of the early cold-like symptoms, until 21 days afterwards, or if treated with antibiotics, the person is infectious until they have completed 5 days of antibiotics.

## Prevention

Immunisation can prevent a person contracting the disease and can reduce the severity of the illness. The pertussis component is combined with diphtheria and tetanus vaccine (DTPa). For young children, it is combined with hepatitis B, *Haemophilus influenzae* type B (HiB) and polio vaccines.

Children who develop pertussis and have been immunised generally have a much milder infection with fewer complications than children who do not receive the vaccine at all.

### Who is eligible to receive free diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (dTpa) vaccine?

- All children in the NT aged 6 weeks, 4 months, 6 months, 18 months, 4 years and 12 years.
- If the vaccine is not received at 12 years of age, a single dose of free dTpa vaccine can be given up until 19 years of age.
- Pertussis vaccine should be given to women during every pregnancy. The best time to administer the pertussis vaccine is between 20 and 32 weeks of pregnancy or immediately after delivery.

### Who else is recommended to receive the adult diphtheria tetanus and pertussis vaccine?

If a pertussis-containing vaccine has not been given in the last 10 years, and they are:

- An adult working with or caring for young children including family members, healthcare and childcare workers
- An adult planning to travel overseas

Vaccinations can be obtained from a GP, some pharmacies, remote health clinic or Community Care Centre.

## Treatment and control

People with infectious pertussis (from the start of the early cold-like symptoms until 21 days afterwards), should stay away from work, school and childcare, until they have completed 5 days of appropriate antibiotics. If antibiotics have not been taken, then people must wait until 21 days after the onset of symptoms before they can return to work, school and childcare.

Preventive antibiotic treatment is recommended for 'high risk' contacts of infectious pertussis cases e.g. young babies and for people from households or other settings who could pass on the disease to young babies. Please see the [Azithromycin for contacts of a person with pertussis | NT Health](#) factsheet.

## Contact

For more information contact the [Public Health Unit's Centre for Disease Control](#) in your region.

Location	Address	Phone	Fax	Email
Darwin	Ground Floor, Building 4 Royal Darwin Hospital Rocklands Dr Tiwi NT 0810	(08) 8922 8044 1800 008 002	(08) 8922 8310	<a href="mailto:CDCSurveillance.DARWIN@nt.gov.au">CDCSurveillance.DARWIN@nt.gov.au</a>
Katherine	O'Keefe House Katherine Hospital Gorge Rd. Katherine NT 0850	(08) 8973 9049	(08) 8973 9048	<a href="mailto:CDC.Katherine@nt.gov.au">CDC.Katherine@nt.gov.au</a>
Tennant Creek	Cnr Windley and Schmidt St. Tennant Creek NT 0860	(08) 8962 4259	(08) 8962 4420	<a href="mailto:CDC.Barkly@nt.gov.au">CDC.Barkly@nt.gov.au</a>
Alice Springs	Disease Control Unit Lower Ground Floor Eurilpa House, 25 Todd St. Alice Springs NT 0870	(08) 8951 7540	(08) 8951 7900	<a href="mailto:CDC.alicesprings@nt.gov.au">CDC.alicesprings@nt.gov.au</a>
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