

Fact Sheet

Whooping Cough (Pertussis), pregnancy and your newborn

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What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a very serious infection of the throat, nose and lungs (this type of infection is sometimes called a respiratory tract infection). The infection is extremely contagious meaning that it passes very quickly from person to person. It is spread by coughing or sneezing. Whooping cough is caused by a bacterium (germ) called *Bordetella Pertussis*.

Unfortunately, in recent times, doctors have seen an increase in cases of whooping cough. This is because the immunity people develop from vaccination decreases over time and so even adults who were vaccinated as children may now catch the illness. There are also more unvaccinated people within the community who can catch and pass on the illness.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

The illness usually starts with symptoms of cold:

- sore throat
- fevers
- runny nose and eyes

Quickly the 'whooping' type of cough starts – this is where the person simply can't stop coughing in fact they sometimes cough so much that they may even vomit. The loud 'whooping' sound often heard is caused by the person gasping for air at the end of the cough. While this is very common, not everyone with whooping cough will 'whoop' at the end of their coughing bouts. Adults, in particular, may have very mild symptoms and so do not realise that they have the illness.

The coughing frequently goes on for a long time. Even if the infected person is treated with antibiotics they will often continue to cough for up to three months.

Once the infected person has taken 5 days of the 10-day course of antibiotics for whooping cough they are NO LONGER contagious as long as the antibiotics are given within 21 days of the beginning of the illness.

It is very important to visit your GP if you are concerned that you, or one of your children may have whooping cough, so that treatment can be started early. Treatment with antibiotics helps prevent the spread of the infection.

Why is whooping cough so serious in young babies?

Babies who catch whooping cough get much sicker, and have more complications than adults or older children do. In addition, while we can vaccinate babies from 6 weeks of age, the vaccine doesn't 'take' before that age. So the very young baby is especially likely to catch the infection.

Most seriously, 1 in every 200 babies under the age of 6 months who catches whooping cough will die from the illness.

Problems caused by whooping cough in babies include:

- bleeding into the brain or eyes from coughing, which can lead to permanent brain damage
- convulsions or fits
- breath-holding
- inflammation of the brain (called encephalitis), which can lead to permanent brain damage
- pneumonia
- death



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What can I do to protect my baby?

If a pregnant woman is immune to whooping cough, that means she has antibodies in her body that will protect her from catching the infection when it is going around her community. These antibodies also pass across to her baby during pregnancy and then go on to protect her baby during the first few months of life before the baby receives their own vaccination at about 6 weeks old. Unfortunately however, antibodies to whooping cough don't always last for a long time, so many pregnant women don't have any to pass over to their babies.

The good news is that if we immunise (vaccinate) you against whooping cough during your pregnancy, antibodies will develop and your baby will be protected. The best time to vaccinate you is between 28-32 weeks of pregnancy as this will give you enough time to build up the antibodies and pass them over to your baby.

Therefore, currently it is recommended that you receive the vaccine as close as possible to 28 weeks in each of your pregnancies, even if your pregnancies are close together. The vaccine is free for pregnant women in NSW.

If, for some reason, you miss out on having the vaccine in pregnancy, we recommend that you receive the vaccine before you leave hospital after delivery of your baby.

It is also recommended that you check that other children in the family are up-to-date with their vaccinations, as well as other family members or carers who will have close contact with your new baby. If they are not immune, encourage them to be vaccinated against whooping cough at least 3 weeks before the new baby arrives. If you are not sure whether children or adults are immune, please discuss this with your GP.

How effective is whooping cough vaccination during pregnancy?

Without vaccination during pregnancy, 50 babies born each year in a large hospital like Westmead will become sick from whooping cough and 40 of those babies will be sick enough to need to spend time in hospital. If all of the women delivering in our hospital were vaccinated, only 4 of those babies would get whooping cough each year. ([NSW Ministry of Health](#))

How safe is whooping cough vaccination during pregnancy?

Whooping cough vaccination is considered very safe during pregnancy. It has been given to many, many thousands of women around the world who were then followed up by researchers. There were no serious side effects in the women although some showed minor effects like mild pain and swelling at the vaccination site (1 in 10 women) and some developed a fever (1 in 5 women). Very importantly, the babies were also closely examined and there was no evidence of any harm at all from the vaccine. In particular, whooping cough vaccine



given during pregnancy does not cause birth defects in unborn children. Furthermore, there is NO scientific evidence that immunisation is associated with Autism in children.

The only people who should not be given the pertussis vaccine are those who previously had a very serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to the vaccine. This type of reaction is extremely rare. Remember that immunity may fade over time and vaccination does not provide 100% protection for every person, so if you are concerned that you or your children may have whooping cough, consult your GP.

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Whooping cough is a serious illness for the community, and particularly for vulnerable babies, but vaccination during pregnancy provides the best protection for your newborn until they are old enough to receive their own vaccination.

[The NSW Department of Health has a handy phone app](#) to remind you when your baby needs their vaccinations:




SAVE THE DATE TO VACCINATE

WHY WHEN WHERE MYTHS & REALITIES PROTECT YOUR COMMUNITY BROCHURE

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**DON'T BE LATE
SAVE THE DATE TO VACCINATE**

Immunisation protects the community against vaccine-preventable diseases. Each vaccine plays an important role, so timely vaccination is the best way to protect your child. This website offers parents access to comprehensive information on immunisation as well as the following, easy-to-use free tools designed to help you **save the date to vaccinate**.

DOWNLOAD APP FOR... ANDROID IPHONE

OR

PRINT YOUR IMMUNISATION SCHEDULE

Illustration of a child with red hair holding a smartphone displaying a vaccine schedule.

We welcome further feedback on this brochure as a way of continually improving our service.

Send your feedback to:
WSLHD-Get_Involved@health.nsw.gov.au

*Pertussis vaccine At: By Airman 1st Class Alexxis Mercer
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