Whooping cough (Pertussis)

Information for you
What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (Pertussis) is a respiratory infection caused by the bacterium (germ) called Bordetella pertussis.

What symptoms does it cause?

Early symptoms of whooping cough are similar to the common cold and may include:

- a blocked or runny nose
- sneezing
- watering eyes
- a dry, irritating cough
- sore throat
- raised temperature
- feeling generally unwell

After one or two weeks, the symptoms may become more severe and include bouts of coughing, sometimes followed by vomiting and a ‘whoop’ sound, and increased tiredness. This stage can last for several weeks, even after treatment. Full recovery can take up to three months.

Who can it affect?

It can affect people of all ages. However, very young children and babies are particularly vulnerable and may occasionally develop serious complications requiring admission to hospital. This infection tends to be milder in teenagers and adults.
Unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated individuals and individuals who have a weakened immune system are at increased risk of infection.

How does whooping cough spread?

The infection is carried in the droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. If these droplets are breathed in by someone else, that person may become infected too.

How infectious is it?

Whooping cough is very infectious, particularly in the early stages. It is easily spread within families, and closed settings, such as schools or nurseries.

After becoming infected, it can take between six and 20 days for the symptoms to develop.

Do you need treatment?

If whooping cough is diagnosed at the early stages, your family doctor (GP) may prescribe a course of antibiotics. Antibiotics will stop you being infectious to others after you have been taking them for five days.

Without antibiotics, you will still be infectious for three weeks after the coughing starts.

Even if you have been prescribed antibiotics, you may still develop a cough.
If whooping cough is diagnosed after you have had symptoms for three weeks, your doctor will not normally prescribe antibiotics as they will not make any difference to your symptoms and you will no longer be infectious.

**Protecting others at high risk**

People at a high risk of whooping cough include:

- Newborn infants
- Unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated children
- Women in the last month or pregnancy
- People who have a weakened immune system
- People with chronic illnesses – for example, asthma or congenital heart disease

People with whooping cough should, where possible, avoid close contact with anyone in these groups until they are no longer infectious.

If there is anyone in your household who is particularly at risk of being severely ill, your family doctor (GP) may prescribe a course of preventative antibiotics.

**Do I need to stay off nursery, school or work?**

Yes, people with whooping cough can remain infectious for up to 21 days and should remain off nursery, school or work during this time, unless they have been treated with antibiotics.

People who have completed five days of appropriate antibiotic treatment can return to nursery, school or work if
they are well enough to do so.

Close contacts (including those treated with preventative antibiotics) can attend nursery, school or work as long as they do not develop symptoms.

**How do you prevent whooping cough?**

While whooping cough can be treated with antibiotics, **vaccination is the most effective way to prevent spread of the disease.**

**Vaccination** against whooping cough is routinely included in the primary immunisations, normally given at two, three and four months of age, with a further dose given with the pre-school booster at around three years and four months. It is important that all children receive these vaccines when they are due.

**Avoid close personal contact** with a person who has whooping cough if you are at risk or are unvaccinated.

**Maintain good cough hygiene:**

- Cover the nose and mouth with a disposable tissue when sneezing, coughing, wiping and blowing the nose.
- Dispose of all used tissues promptly into a waste bin.
- Wash hands with warm water and liquid soap after coughing, sneezing, using tissues, or after contact with respiratory secretions or objects contaminated by these secretions.
- If you don’t have a tissue on you, cough/sneeze into your elbow.
Further information

If you have concerns about your health speak to your family doctor (GP) or health visitor.

You can get more information on whooping cough infection from the Health Protection Nurse Specialist on 01292 885858. You will also find information on NHS Inform - http://www.nhsinform.co.uk/health-library/articles/w/whooping-cough/symptoms
Your notes

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