

FACTSHEET



This fact sheet is for education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professionals to make sure this information is right for your child. If you would like to provide feedback on this fact sheet, please visit: www.schn.health.nsw.gov.au/parents-and-carers/fact-sheets/feedback-form.

Whooping cough (Pertussis)

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is an infection caused by a bacterium called *Bordetella pertussis*. Pertussis (which means 'forceful cough') is another name for whooping cough.

How do you catch whooping cough?

Whooping cough is caught by being coughed or sneezed on, or spending a large amount of time in the same close breathing space as someone with the infection (often by a parent, or an older child or adult who does not know they are infected). If everyone has been immunised in the last few years there is little whooping cough around, but if immunisation uptake is low or it has been a long time since people were immunised then there is a higher risk of catching the infection. Babies tend to catch whooping cough from their immediate family members.

Is whooping cough dangerous?

In babies less than six months of age, and occasionally in older children, it can cause severe disease. In Australia, one baby dies about every two years from whooping cough, and more are left brain damaged by the infection. In older children, whooping cough is not usually life threatening. However, it causes a very nasty cough that often lasts many weeks - the Chinese call it the 100-day cough. Children with whooping cough can't stop coughing and can't catch their breath. At the end of a coughing bout, when they gasp or whoop, they may go

blue, and often vomit. They can wake several times a night with the cough, so the whole family gets very little sleep. The forceful coughing can often cause scleral haemorrhage (bleeding in the whites of the eye).

Can whooping cough be prevented?

Immunisation is the best way of preventing whooping cough or making it less severe. It is given to babies from six weeks of age, and starts to provide protection after the second dose, which is given at four months of age. If everyone is immunised, then there is very little whooping cough in the community. The whooping cough vaccine can be given to mothers in pregnancy and to parents, grandparents, siblings and any carer to reduce the risk to newborn babies.

Family members in contact with young infants with whooping cough are given an antibiotic (usually azithromycin, erythromycin or clarithromycin), but this is a much less efficient way of preventing the spread than immunisation. Unfortunately the antibiotic does not shorten whooping cough illness, once the coughing stage has begun.

Is whooping cough vaccine dangerous?

Whooping cough vaccine has side effects for some people, but these are mostly minor (soreness and/or swelling at the site of the injection, sometimes fever or irritability) and is almost never dangerous. The new vaccine for adults (parents) is designed to be very safe to give to adults, even if they have been vaccinated or had whooping cough before.

Does the vaccine always work?

No vaccine is 100 per cent effective. The whooping cough vaccine works best when there is little whooping cough circulating in the community or if it has not been too long since the vaccine was received. Even when there is a lot of whooping cough around, immunised children are less likely to catch it. If an immunised child does catch whooping cough, the illness is almost always milder than it is in children who have not been immunised.

How do I get my child immunised?

A vaccine to protect your child against whooping cough can be given by your family doctor, at a local child health clinic or in the emergency department of a hospital. This vaccine is **free** as it is part of the Australian Immunisation Schedule that is funded by the government. There is also a vaccine to prevent adolescents and adults from getting whooping cough that is also **free**, as it is part of the Australian Immunisation Schedule and funded by the government.

It is important to note that although the vaccine is free, a consultation fee may apply.

For more information visit the Immunise Australia Program website: www.immunise.health.gov.au

Remember:

- To check your child's immunisation is up to date.
- Consult your GP or local child health clinic to obtain a free vaccination.