

Whooping cough

Public Health Information Sheet



Whooping cough (or Pertussis) is a serious infection that causes a long coughing illness. It spreads easily between people. Whooping cough can be very serious for pēpi, tamariki and older adults.

Symptoms of whooping cough

Whooping cough causes breathing difficulties and severe coughing fits. The cough can go on for weeks or months which is why it is sometimes called the '100 day cough'.

The symptoms of whooping cough usually appear around 1 week after infection.

The first signs of whooping cough are usually in the first 5 to 10 days. This is when you are most infectious. The symptoms are similar to a cold, with:

- a blocked or runny nose
- sneezing
- a mild fever
- ongoing spasms of coughing.

After about 1 week, symptoms include:

- uncontrollable coughing fits that last for a few minutes
- coughing that leads to vomiting
- a thick mucus that can make you vomit or choke.

Sometimes people will make a 'whoop' sound when gasping for breath between coughs. This is a common sign of whooping cough but is not always heard.

Complications for tamariki

Whooping cough can be very serious for pēpi and tamariki, especially those under 1 year old. Many pēpi catch whooping cough from their older siblings or parents – often before they are old enough to be immunised.

If your pēpi catches whooping cough, they:

- may not be able to feed properly
- may not be able to breathe properly
- may become so ill they need to go to hospital
- could end up with serious complications such as pneumonia or brain damage.

How does whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough spreads easily between people by coughing and sneezing.

A person with whooping cough is likely to be infectious from the week before they start coughing when they have cold-like symptoms, to 3 weeks after the cough begins. This is when they can give whooping cough to other people.

Seeking immediate medical advice

Call 111 and ask for an ambulance in an emergency if you or your tamariki:

- are very ill
- are having breathing difficulties
- have long periods of coughing that end in vomiting
- turn blue from coughing.

Young pēpi under 2 months old may stop breathing as a first sign of whooping cough.

Whooping cough is very serious for pēpi and may require hospitalisation.

Diagnosing whooping cough

If you think you or someone in your whānau has whooping cough but do not need immediate help, contact your healthcare provider.

They can arrange a swab test to see if you have the bacteria that causes whooping cough.

Treating whooping cough

If you have whooping cough:

- you may be given antibiotics to take at home if you are diagnosed early — take the full amount prescribed to you to kill all the bacteria and lessen the spread to others
- your healthcare provider will tell you how to care for yourself or your tamariki at home while you recover.

If whooping cough is diagnosed in the later stages, you might not be prescribed antibiotics. You will no longer be infectious and they will not improve your symptoms.

The recovery stage may last for months. Although the cough eventually disappears after several weeks, coughing fits may recur if you suffer any later respiratory infection.

Young pēpi (less than 1 year old) with whooping cough may need hospital treatment. If your tamariki is admitted to hospital, they are usually put in an isolation room. This is to stop the infection spreading to other patients.

Preventing whooping cough

Immunisation is the best way to protect you and your whānau from whooping cough.

Whooping cough vaccines are free for pregnant people, all children under 18 years old and adults from 45 and 65 years old (if they have received fewer than four tetanus doses in their lifetime).

Whooping cough is particularly dangerous for babies — especially those who have not been vaccinated. More than half of babies under 12 months old who catch whooping cough need to go to hospital, and up to 1 in 50 of these babies die.

By getting immunised when you are pregnant, you will protect your pēpi until they can have their first immunisations when they are 6 weeks old. This is because your immunity passes to your baby through the placenta.

It is most effective when given from 16 to 26 weeks of pregnancy, but is available and free from 13 weeks of every pregnancy.

If you are unsure if your whānau has been vaccinated for pertussis, please contact your healthcare provider or visit My Health Record <https://my.health.nz/> to access your immunisation records.

For more information

For health advice contact your doctor. You can also call Healthline for free anytime on 0800 611 116. Healthline has interpreters for those who need one.

For more information on whooping cough visit: info.health.nz/conditions-treatments/infectious-diseases/whooping-cough



Need more help?

You can call **Healthline** for free, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on **0800 611 116**.

Talk to your pharmacist, hauora Māori provider, Pacific health clinic or doctor.