

Pertussis (whooping cough) public health key messages

October 2024

Increased risk of Pertussis

Aotearoa New Zealand is at high risk of a pertussis (whooping cough) outbreak due to increased numbers of cases across the motu.

Pertussis causes breathing difficulties and severe coughing fits. It can be spread easily between people, usually by coughing and sneezing. It is particularly serious for pēpi, tamariki and older adults, and in some cases, can also be fatal.

Vaccination provides the best protection

The best protection for you and your whānau against Pertussis is to get vaccinated – particularly pregnant people, pēpi, tamariki and older adults who are at higher risk. Pertussis is highly contagious and can cause serious harm to babies, especially those who are too young to be vaccinated.

Getting vaccinated for whooping cough while you are pregnant protects your baby from serious complications of this disease. The whooping cough pregnancy vaccine is FREE, and is available from 13 weeks, but is best given from 16 weeks of pregnancy. The vaccine should also be given with each pregnancy to protect each baby.

Pertussis vaccinations are free for children under 18. This includes visitors to Aotearoa New Zealand, and it does not matter what their visa or citizenship status is.

Childhood vaccinations to protect against whooping cough are needed at ages 6 weeks, 3 months and 5 months, and again at 4 years. A further booster is given at age 11 years (school year 7), and it is important that children are kept up to date with all of their vaccinations to provide the best protection. But even if tamariki have missed their vaccinations, it's not too late to catch up.

New Zealand has a combined pertussis and tetanus vaccine. Adults are eligible for one free booster from age 45 (if they have not had four previous tetanus doses) and can get one free from age 65.

For more information, or help to book your vaccination, call the Vaccination Healthline free on 0800 28 29 26 (8.30am-5.00pm Monday to Friday) or visit info.health.nz/bookavaccine

Signs and symptoms

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'.

People are most infectious in the early stages – with the first signs of whooping cough usually appearing around 1 week after infection. 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 — sometimes 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 to the point of stopping breathing or turning blue
- may become so ill they need to go to hospital
- could end up with serious complications such as pneumonia or brain damage.

Around 50% of pēpi who catch whooping cough before the age of 12 months need hospitalisation and 1 or 2 in 100 of those hospitalised pēpi die from the infection.

Diagnosing Pertussis

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

If you have whooping cough or are waiting for test results, you should stay home and isolate so that you do not give it to other people.

Who to contact for help

If you have symptoms that you are worried about:

- contact your usual doctor or healthcare provider
- call Healthline for free advice [0800 611 116](tel:0800611116)
- call 111 for an ambulance in an emergency.