

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Fact Sheet

What is Whooping Cough?

Whooping cough is a respiratory infection caused by the bacterial *Bordetella pertussis*. Whooping cough usually begins just like a cold – with a runny nose, general tiredness and sometimes a mild fever.

Mostly in young children, coughing develops, occurring in 'attacks' or 'spasms', which are often followed by a big deep gasp. A 'whooping' sound can also be produced. Severe attacks of coughing can also result in vomiting. Older children and adults may have a less serious cough that may still occur in 'attacks' or 'spasms', which continues for many weeks. Whooping cough occurs in people of ALL ages.

It has been found that the vaccine we may have received as children only lasts a few years and can sometimes be incomplete. This means we can get whooping cough as adults. A second booster vaccine is recommended for adolescents aged 15-17 years and a vaccine is now available for adults. Due to the highly contagious nature and seriousness of the disease, whenever a diagnosis of whooping cough is made, the Public Health Unit is contacted to trace family members and any other people who may have been exposed to the whooping cough to arrange treatment if required.

Diagnosis is usually made by performing a throat swab, which is then sent to pathology. It is important to see a doctor to ensure a correct diagnosis is made and the correct antibiotic is prescribed for you.

Who is at risk from Whooping Cough infections?

The higher risk groups are:

- Anyone who has not been immunized or whose immunity against whooping cough has waned.
- Babies (can be fatal) who are too young to receive immunization (less than 2 months).
- Babies and children who have not

completed their course of immunization

- Pregnant women
- Anyone with a low immunity
- The elderly

How can Whooping Cough be spread?

Whooping cough can be spread by direct contact with an infected person during an episode of coughing or sneezing, which results in the spraying of droplets, which carry the bacteria. Or by indirect contact with contaminated items or surfaces from the spraying of droplets (e.g., hospital equipment, bed and bedding or furniture). Once you touch the contaminated items, it is very easy to then touch your eyes, nose or mouth and infect yourself with the bacteria. To prevent the spread of whooping cough to staff and other sick patients in the hospital, the nursing staff will care for you using special infection control precautions.

How will my care change whilst in hospital?

- You will be considered infectious until you have completed at least 5 days of your course of antibiotics.
- Regular and thorough hand hygiene is one of the most successful ways to prevent the spread of ALL infections.
- A sign is placed outside your door to alert hospital staff for the need to use special protective infection control precautions. This sign also alerts visitors of the need to speak with nursing staff prior to entering your room.
- The hospital staff will wear protective apparel such as gloves, an apron or gown and a mask when they enter your room. These items are disposed of in a separate waste bin as the staff member leaves your room.
- You will be allocated a private room with your own en-suite facilities. The door of your room can remain open. We ask that your movements throughout the ward is limited to essential movement only, such as physiotherapy.
- If you need to leave your room, you will need to wear a MASK until 5 days of the

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course of your antibiotics have been completed. IF you are unsure about when you can leave your room, please speak to the nursing staff.

Good Hand Hygiene Practices

Hand hygiene is the most effective way to prevent ALL infections, including the flu and the common cold. Encourage your family and friends to learn and maintain good hand hygiene practices every day. Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the infection prevention and control team.

During your stay in hospital, you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based hand rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled / dirty. There are a variety of brands on the market and are available for purchase at most pharmacies. You may choose to use this type of product at home.

Can I still have visitors?

Yes – but visitors who SHOULD NOT come to see you are those who HAVE NOT been immunized against whooping cough before, especially children, newborn babies, anyone who may have a lowered immunity or is pregnant. If you are unsure about having contact with your family and friends during your infectious stage, please speak to your doctor or ask to speak with the infection control nurse. Whilst you are infectious, your visitors will be asked to wear a mask to protect them from infection; they may also be required to wear gloves and an apron if they are assisting you with care. The nursing staff will direct your visitors in applying these items. The nursing staff will educate your visitors on the need to perform hand hygiene before entering your room and when they leave your room. We would appreciate it if you would also encourage your visitors to perform this hand hygiene, as this is the most effective way to prevent any infection.

What happens when I go home?

- Until 5 days of the course of antibiotics have been completed, it is important that anyone assisting you with close personal care wears a mask if they are going to be in close contact with you. After removing the mask and disposing of the mask immediately in the rubbish bin, they must wash their hands well.
- There are no special precautions required for the washing of clothes, linen, crockery, and cutlery or for the cleaning of the bath, toilet, and shower. But washing with hot water is recommended.
- It is important that anyone assisting you with close personal care wears gloves if they are going to be in contact with any wounds, blood, urine or faeces. They must wash their hands well, after removing their gloves and disposing of the gloves immediately in the rubbish bin.
- When you return home, it is important for you, your family, and your friends to continue the good hand hygiene practices that you have been taught in hospital every day.
- You should stay away from public gatherings of people including sporting events, schools, restaurants, shopping centres, etc. until you have completed 5 full days of antibiotic therapy.

Where can I get further information?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Control Department, ask your nurse to contact us. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Our contact numbers are (02) 9480 9433 or (02) 9480 9732.

Alternatively, contact your Local Public Health Unit 1300 066 055.

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References

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