

Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Questions and Answers in relation to Whooping Cough in schools

- How do you get pertussis (whooping cough)?

Pertussis is spread when an infectious person coughs bacteria (known as *Bordetella pertussis*) into the air which can be inhaled by people nearby. If they are not treated early, people with pertussis are infectious in the first three weeks of their illness. Pertussis spreads easily through families, childcare centres, and at school. A person with pertussis is infectious when they first become symptomatic, which may start with a runny nose.

- How close do you need to be to get pertussis from another person?

Pertussis is spread through close contact with another person. It will usually require a period of 1 hour face-to-face contact within 1m with a case to contract the disease. Pertussis is not spread by short periods of time in the same room as a case. Living with, or spending many hours in the same space as, a case may also transmit the disease. Newborns are more vulnerable to the disease and may be considered at risk after much shorter periods of contact with a case.

- What are the symptoms of pertussis?

In vaccinated people it can be hard to tell the difference between pertussis and other causes of cough. Pertussis usually begins like a cold with a blocked or runny nose, tiredness, mild fever and a cough. The cough can get worse and severe bouts of uncontrollable coughing can develop. Coughing bouts can be followed by vomiting, choking or taking a big gasping breath which causes a "whooping" sound. In vaccinated people, the cough may be mild and they may not have the whoop. Older children and adults may just have a persistent cough that lasts for many weeks. Some newborns may not cough at all but they can stop breathing and turn blue. Some babies have difficulties feeding and can choke or gag.

- When should I suspect pertussis?

Pertussis should be considered when:

- A person has a cough that leads to vomiting or whooping
- A person has a persistent cough that lasts over two weeks
- Any coughing illness in the context of an outbreak (eg a when there is a number of recent confirmed cases in a school)
- A newborn has breathing difficulties

- What should I do if I am concerned my child or I have pertussis?

If you are concerned that you, or your child, have pertussis you should see your GP to arrange testing. The recommended test is a swab from the back of the nose or throat. Testing is not recommended in people with no symptoms as the results will not be reliable.

- Who is most at risk from pertussis?

Infants under 6 months of age are most at risk from pertussis because they can experience severe disease or death. In general vaccinated school-aged children will experience a mild illness. Pregnant women in the last month of pregnancy are considered at risk due to the potential to transmit the disease to their baby **after the birth**. Pregnant women cannot pass on the disease to the baby before the baby is born.

- **Can you get pertussis if you are vaccinated?**

YES. The pertussis vaccine is not as effective as many others (for example measles vaccine provides protection 98% of the time after 2 doses). The vaccine is valuable because it prevents pertussis deaths in infants, reduces the severity of the disease, and limits, but does not entirely stop, spread of the disease. Vaccinated people can still get pertussis but will be likely to have a milder form.

- **Is pertussis circulating because of unvaccinated children?**

Although vaccination is very effective in preventing serious disease in infants and reducing illness severity in general, our current vaccines have not been able to prevent the infection from circulating in the community. The pertussis bacteria *Bordetella pertussis* are very good at evading the body's immune system and even past pertussis infection does not prevent someone from getting the disease again. In most cases pertussis is likely to have been contracted from a vaccinated person.

- **Should parents of newborns keep their other children home from school if there is an outbreak?**

Pertussis is always circulating in the community and it is not recommended that well siblings miss school if there are known pertussis cases in the school. Parents of newborns, with siblings attending a school with known pertussis, should be highly vigilant for symptoms in the siblings and, if a sibling gets symptoms consistent with pertussis, you should keep them away from the newborn until the sibling is assessed and cleared by a GP.

- **What are the best ways to protect my newborn baby?**

There are many ways to protect newborn babies from pertussis which include:

- Providing vaccination to the mother **before the baby is born** (ideally at 28-32 weeks pregnant) to provide the baby with antibodies. This will not provide complete protection but has been shown to be effective in reducing illness in the first two months of life.
- Vaccinating siblings and adults that regularly care for the baby to increase the level of protection around the baby. Adults require a booster every 10 years.
- Keeping them away from anyone with any respiratory symptoms
- Remain vigilant for symptoms in siblings and other family members and ensuring the baby is kept separate until the family member is assessed
- If the baby is exposed to a known case see your GP for assessment and treatment
- If a baby develops symptoms see your GP for assessment and treatment

- **What obligations do schools have under the Public Health Act when a child is diagnosed with pertussis?**

When a child is enrolled, the principal must obtain details of the vaccinations received by the child up to that time; for this purpose, parents will usually need to provide the school with a copy of their child's **AIR Immunisation History Statement** obtainable through Medicare.

If the school principal believes that a child at the school has been diagnosed with pertussis, then ***the principal must inform the Public Health Unit as soon as practicable***; this information must include details of the child and the parent's contact details, as the Public Health Unit may need to obtain further information about the disease and may need to phone the doctor who attended the child.

Information on notification can be found at

www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/Pages/notification.aspx#3