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Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Description

Whooping cough (or pertussis) is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. Whooping cough can affect people of any age. For adolescents and adults, the infection may only cause a persistent cough. However, for babies and young children, whooping cough can be life threatening. Complications of whooping cough in babies include pneumonia, fits and brain damage from prolonged lack of oxygen. Most hospitalisations and deaths occur in babies less than six months of age. Pregnant Queensland women in their third trimester can have a free whooping cough vaccine from their GP.

Signs and symptoms

Whooping cough may start like a cold, with a runny nose, sneezing and tiredness, and then the characteristic cough develops. These coughing bouts can be very severe and frightening, and may end with a crowing noise (the 'whoop'). This occurs as air is drawn back into the chest, and can be followed by vomiting or gagging. During coughing attacks, a child's breathing can be obstructed and they may become blue or stop breathing. Bouts of coughing may continue for many weeks even after treatment. Babies under six months of age, vaccinated children, adolescents and adults often don't display the typical whoop.

Treatment

Treatment is a full course of antibiotics which reduces the time a person is infectious to others. Antibiotics need to be given within 21 days of the start of general symptoms or within 14 days of the start of paroxysmal coughing. Antibiotics may reduce symptoms if given early. Your doctor will advise. Some people who have had close contact with an infected person may need to take antibiotics to prevent infection. This includes people at high risk of serious complications (eg. children aged less than six months and women near the end of their pregnancy) and others who live or work with people at risk.

Control

A person with whooping cough should stay away from work, school, preschool and child-care until they have had at least 5 days of their course of antibiotics, or until 21 days after the cough began. If people who have had close contact with an infected person are not fully vaccinated, they may need to stay away from places where there are young children or pregnant women. Your local doctor can provide advice on this.

Prevention

Immunisation is the most effective way to control whooping cough. Immunisation against whooping cough is recommended as part of the National Immunisation Program Schedule and free vaccine is funded for:

- Infants aged 2 months (vaccines due at 2 months can be given from 6 weeks), 4 months and 6 months
- Children aged 4 years (vaccines due at 4 years can be given from 3 years 6 months)
- Year 8 and year 10 students (this booster is administered as part of the school program)

In 2014, Queensland will offer both Year 8 and Year 10 students a combined diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (dTpa) booster dose as part of the School Vaccination Program. Vaccination for Year 10 students will cease at the end of 2015 ie Year 8 students previously vaccinated will then be in Year 10.

To ensure full protection, it is important that your child receives all recommended doses of the vaccine at the recommended times. The whooping cough vaccine for children is given as one injection combined with some other childhood vaccines.

Pregnant Queensland women in their third trimester can have a free whooping cough vaccine from their GP. This is for women who have not received a whooping cough containing vaccine in the last 5 years. Talk to your midwife or doctor at a routine antenatal appointment when you are between 28 and 38 weeks pregnant and find out if you should have this vaccine. Download the factsheet about the whooping cough vaccination program.

A booster dose is strongly recommended (but not funded) for:

- males and females planning a pregnancy
- people working with, living with or caring for babies under six months eg. healthcare workers, childcare workers, fathers and grandparents
- any other adults who want to reduce the risk of infection and haven't had a previous booster in the last ten years.

Like all medications, vaccines may have side effects. Most side effects are minor, last a short time and do not lead to any long-term problems. Possible side effects of whooping cough vaccine may include fever, redness and soreness or swelling where the injection was given, nausea, headache, tiredness and aching muscles. More serious side effects are extremely rare but can include severe allergic reactions. Contact your immunisation provider if you or your child has a reaction following vaccination which you consider serious or unexpected.

Transmission

Whooping cough bacteria are highly infectious and are spread to other people by an infected person coughing and sneezing. The infection can also be passed on through direct contact with infected secretions from the mouth or nose. The time between exposure to the bacteria and getting sick is usually seven to ten days, but can be up to three weeks. A person is most infectious in the early stages of their illness. Unless treated with appropriate antibiotics for at least five days, a person is regarded as infectious for three weeks after the cough began.

Help and assistance

For further assistance, please contact your local doctor, community health centre or nearest public health unit. You can be immunised at your local doctor or medical centre. Check with your local council, community child health and community health centre regarding free immunisation clinics.

Related Content

- Having a vaccination what to expect fact sheet
- Immunisation onHealth and wellbeing
- Communicable Disease Control Guidance and Information: A-Z
- School Based Vaccination Program

Other Resources

- 13 HEALTH (call 13 43 25 84)
- Immunise Australia (call 1800 671 811)

References

Heymann, D. (Ed) 2008. *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 19th edition. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.

Australian Government, 2013. *The Australian Immunisation Handbook (10th Ed.)*