

Whooping cough

Whooping cough (also called pertussis) is a serious infection that makes it hard to breathe and causes a long coughing illness which spreads easily between people. Immunisation is the best way to protect you and your whānau against whooping cough – particularly during pregnancy, and for pēpi (babies), tamariki (children) and older adults who are at higher risk of getting very sick with this illness.



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 early cold-like symptoms, until 3 weeks after the cough begins. This is when they can spread whooping cough to other people.

To help prevent illnesses like whooping cough from spreading, cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, throw away used tissues and wash and dry your hands well afterwards.



Signs and symptoms – what you can see and feel

Whooping cough makes it hard to breathe and causes 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 one week after you get infected. You are most infectious during the early stages of the illness.

Early symptoms are similar to a cold and include:

- a blocked or runny nose
- sneezing
- a mild fever
- difficulty breathing
- ongoing coughing fits.

After about 1 week, symptoms get worse and include:

- uncontrollable coughing lasting a few minutes or causing vomiting and sometimes fainting
- coughing that may cause a 'whoop' sound between breaths
- a thick mucus that can make you vomit or choke
- babies may stop breathing or turn blue.



Seeking health advice

If you think you or someone in your whānau or care has whooping cough, contact your GP or healthcare provider for advice urgently. They may want to arrange a test for you to see if you have whooping cough.

If you, your tamariki or those you care for have any of the following symptoms, this is an emergency – please call 111 and ask for an ambulance or go to your nearest hospital emergency department (ED). Symptoms include:

- feeling very ill
- finding it hard to breathe
- turning blue or stopping breathing from coughing.

Whooping cough is very serious for pēpi, with many becoming so sick they need to go to hospital. In some cases, whooping cough can cause death.



Special advice for parents and caregivers

Whooping cough can be very serious for pēpi and tamariki, especially those aged under 12 months old. Around half of pēpi who catch whooping cough before the age of 12 months need to be cared for in hospital, and around 1 or 2 in every 100 of those in hospital die from the infection.

Many pēpi catch whooping cough from people they live with – sometimes before they are old enough to be immunised (under the age of 6 weeks).

If your pēpi, or a pēpi you care for, catches whooping cough, they may:

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



What happens if I get whooping cough?

If you have whooping cough:

- you may be given antibiotics to take at home if you are diagnosed early – it is important you take the full amount prescribed to you to kill all the bacteria and lower the risk of you spreading the infection to others
- your healthcare provider will tell you how to care for yourself, your tamariki or those in your care, at home while you or they recover.

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

After having whooping cough, it may take a very long time for you to recover – for some people it can be months before they feel back to normal. Although the cough eventually disappears after several weeks, you may experience coughing fits again if you suffer any later respiratory infection.

Young pēpi (less than 12 months old) with whooping cough may need hospital care. If your pēpi, or a pēpi in your care, needs to spend time in hospital, they are usually put in their own room. This is to stop the infection spreading to other patients.

Prevention

The best protection for you and your whānau against whooping cough is to be up to date with their immunisations.

During pregnancy: getting immunised for whooping cough while you are pregnant is safe and protects your pēpi from serious complications of this infection until they can have their own immunisations (from when they are 6 weeks old). This is because your immunity to whooping cough will pass on to your pēpi through the placenta.

The whooping cough vaccine is FREE from 13 weeks of pregnancy, but it is best given from 16 weeks of pregnancy. The vaccine should also be given during **each** pregnancy to protect each pēpi.

Pēpi and Tamariki: whooping cough is particularly dangerous for pēpi – especially those who are not yet fully immunised.

Childhood immunisations to protect against whooping cough are FREE for tamariki under 18. They are given at 6 weeks, 3 months, 5 months, 4 years, and a further booster at age 11 years.

It is important that tamariki are kept up to date with all of their immunisations to provide the best protection. But even if they have missed their immunisations, it is never too late to catch up.

Adults: are eligible for one FREE booster from age 45 if they have not had four previous tetanus-containing vaccines (Aotearoa New Zealand has a combined pertussis and tetanus vaccine) earlier in their lifetime and they can get one FREE booster from age 65.

Some people may be recommended to have a booster, for example if you have a newborn pēpi expected in the home, or you work with pēpi/tamariki, but this may not be funded. Ask your healthcare provider if a booster is recommended for you and what this may cost. Many community pharmacies can offer these vaccines.

If you are unsure if you or your tamariki have been immunised, contact your GP or healthcare provider to check if your family is fully protected.

To book a vaccination appointment or for further information, talk to your GP or healthcare provider, call the Vaccination Healthline free on 0800 28 29 26 (8.30am–5.00pm Monday to Friday) or visit info.health.nz/bookavaccine

For more information:

- Visit the Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora website info.health.nz/whoopingcough
- Free NZ Relay Services are available at nzrelay.co.nz if you are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have a speech impairment
- Call Healthline on **0800 611 116**, anytime 24/7 for free health advice and information about what to do next. You can choose to speak with a Māori clinician if you are calling between 8am and 8pm. Interpreter services and NZ Relay support are also available
- For people living or visiting rurally, you can contact a doctor after hours at Ka Ora Telecare **0800 2 KA ORA (0800 252 672)** or www.kaora.co.nz
- A dedicated helpline for Disability support is available Monday to Friday, between 8.00am and 5.00pm. Call free on **0800 11 12 13** or text **8988** for help and information or visit healthpoint.co.nz/disability-helpline