

What you need to know about...

WHOOPING COUGH

False-colour transmission electron micrograph of the whooping cough bacterium



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WHAT IS WHOOPING COUGH?

- Whooping cough or pertussis is an infectious bacterial disease caused by *Bordetella pertussis*.
- The disease is characterised by bouts of paroxysmal coughing.
- The cough can last for many weeks and in some cases can persist for up to three months.
- Whooping cough is contagious.
- Immunisation against the disease means it is now uncommon in the UK.
- Pertussis can have serious complications particularly in babies who are less than six months old. It can be fatal.

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

- Pertussis is spread by infected droplets.
- The incubation period is 7–10 days after contact with an infected person.
- The infectious period lasts from one to three weeks after the onset of bouts of coughing.
- Five days of antibiotic treatment ensures a case is non-infectious.

INCIDENCE

- Most cases occur in children, but adults can be infected especially if they have not been immunised.
- Before the immunisation programme was introduced in the 1950s there was an average of 100,000 notified cases each year in England and Wales.
- In the early 1970s immunisation coverage of more than 80 per cent reduced incidence to a few thousand cases each year.
- Immunisation levels dropped in the late 1970s and early 1980s because of public anxiety about a possible link between the vaccine and brain damage.
- Immunisation coverage levels are now up to 94 per cent and the number of notified cases in England and Wales in 2003 was only 409.

SYMPTOMS

- Presents initially like a common cold with a fever.
- After a few days an irritating cough develops into persistent coughing bouts, which can be distressing and exhausting.
- The characteristic 'whoop' of the cough is the sound of the sucking in of air after prolonged coughing out.
- The 'whoop' is not always present,

particularly in infants.

- Coughing may be followed by vomiting.
- The number of coughing bouts per day is 12–20 on average, but can be as many as 100.
- Babies may go blue during or immediately after a bout of coughing.
- If in doubt, diagnosis can be made by a throat or nose swab to confirm the presence of *B. pertussis*.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS?

- Pertussis is usually most severe in infants, about half of whom are admitted to hospital. Oxygen therapy and rehydration may be needed.
- Pneumonia can develop as a secondary lung infection. Look out for high temperatures and difficulty with breathing.
- Pressure from intense coughing can cause blood vessels to rupture producing nose bleeds or haemoptysis.
- Brain damage occurs rarely.

TREATMENT

- Once the disease is established there is no treatment that will alter the course of the illness.
- A five-day course of antibiotics will kill the bacteria and remove the risk of infecting others.

PREVENTION

- Non-immunised family members who are in contact with pertussis should be given a course of antibiotics to prevent the disease developing.
- Immunisation against pertussis is part of the triple vaccine given at two, three and four months of age.
- Breastfeeding does not provide immunity against the disease.

WEBSITES

Health Protection Agency:
www.hpa.org.uk

NHS Direct:
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Prodigy:
www.prodigy.nhs.uk