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](http://www.hpa.org.uk)
- [NHS Direct](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)
- [Prodigy](http://www.prodigy.nhs.uk)