

Whooping cough

Whooping cough (also called pertussis) is a bacterial infection of the lungs and breathing tubes. It spreads very easily.

Check if you or your child has whooping cough

The first signs of whooping cough are like a [cold](#).

After about a week, you or your child:

- will get coughing bouts that last for a few minutes and are worse at night
- will make a "whoop" sound – a gasp for breath between coughs (young babies and some adults may not "whoop")
- may bring up a thick mucus, which can make you sick (vomit)
- may become very red in the face (more common in adults)

Urgent advice: See a GP urgently or call 111 if:

- your baby is under 6 months old and has symptoms of whooping cough
- you or your child have a very bad cough that is getting worse
- you've been in contact with someone with whooping cough and you're pregnant
- you or your child has been in contact with someone with whooping cough and have a weakened immune system

Whooping cough can spread very easily. It's best to call the GP before you go in. They might suggest talking over the phone.

Whooping cough can be dangerous

Babies under 6 months old have increased chances of problems including:

- [dehydration](#)
- breathing difficulties
- [pneumonia](#)
- fits (seizures)

Whooping cough is less severe in older children and adults but coughing may cause problems including:

- [nosebleeds](#)
- sore ribs
- [hernia](#)

Immediate action required: Call 999 or go to A&E if:

- your child has periods of stopping breathing and their face or lips go blue (cyanosis)
- you or your child are finding it hard to breathe properly (shallow breathing)
- you or your child have chest pain that's worse when breathing or coughing – this could be a sign of pneumonia
- your child is having fits (seizures)

Treatment for whooping cough

Treatment depends on your age and how long you've had the infection.

If your whooping cough is severe, or your baby is under 6 months old and has whooping cough, you'll usually need treatment in hospital.

If diagnosed within 3 weeks of the infection, you'll be given antibiotics to help stop it spreading to others. Antibiotics may not reduce symptoms.

If you've had whooping cough for more than 3 weeks, you're no longer contagious and do not need antibiotics.

Important

Carry on taking the antibiotics until you've completed the course, even if you feel better.

Things you can do yourself to relieve the symptoms of whooping cough

Do

- get plenty of rest
- drink lots of fluids
- take paracetamol or ibuprofen to relieve discomfort

Don't

- do not give a child under 16 paracetamol and ibuprofen at the same time. Always check first with a GP or pharmacist
- do not give aspirin to children under 16
- do not take cough medicines – they're not suitable for young children and do not help with this type of cough

How long whooping cough is contagious for

You're contagious from about 6 days after the start of cold-like symptoms to 3 weeks after the coughing starts.

If you start antibiotics within 3 weeks of starting to cough, it will reduce the time you're contagious for.

The whooping cough vaccine

The whooping cough vaccine protects babies and children from getting whooping cough. That's why it's important to have all the [routine NHS vaccinations](#).

The vaccine is routinely given as part of:

- the [6-in-1 vaccine](#) - for babies at 8, 12 and 16 weeks
- the [4-in-1 pre-school booster](#) – for pre-school children

If you're pregnant you should also have the [whooping cough vaccine](#) – ideally between 16 and 32 weeks.