

Whooping cough and immunisation

Description:

What is whooping cough? Whooping cough (pertussis) is a highly contagious disease that is spread by coughing, sneezing and direct contact with infected nose or mouth secretions (such as when sharing food or kissing).

Who is most at risk? Whooping cough is most serious in babies less than 6 months of age as they are not fully protected by vaccination. Most babies with whooping cough catch it from a parent or other close family member or carer.

Complications of whooping cough in babies include pneumonia, fits and brain damage from prolonged lack of oxygen. Most hospitalisations and deaths occur in those less than 6 months of age.

How can whooping cough be prevented? Immunisation is the best way to prevent whooping cough. A combination vaccine protecting against whooping cough is given at 2 months (can be given from 6 weeks of age), 4 months and 6 months of age; and booster doses are given at 4 years (can be given from 3 years 6 months of age) and to students in year 10 at school. It is very important that vaccinations are given when they are due so you need to make sure that your baby is vaccinated on time.

The best protection for babies less than 6 months of age against whooping cough is for any adults who care for your baby to get a whooping cough booster vaccine.

What is the whooping cough booster vaccine? The whooping cough booster vaccine is a combination vaccine that provides protection against whooping cough, diphtheria and tetanus. It is safe to use in the post natal period and while breast feeding. The vaccine can be given at any time after a previous dose of a vaccine containing tetanus and diphtheria toxoids.

How long does protection last? Natural infection with whooping cough does not guarantee lifelong protection, and neither does vaccination against the disease. Protection after the disease or vaccination lasts up to ten years.

Who can receive the free whooping cough booster vaccine? For a limited time, a free adult booster dose of whooping cough vaccine is available for:

- birth parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents of babies under 6 months of age
- other adults in a household with a baby under 6 months of age.

Mothers of newborn babies should see their doctor or immunisation provider to get vaccinated as soon as possible after the birth of the baby.

Other eligible people can request their free vaccination prior to the birth of the baby.

You can obtain this free vaccination from your doctor or immunisation provider.

What if I am not eligible for the free vaccine? Ask your doctor or immunisation provider about getting the whooping cough booster vaccine - it will need to be purchased on private prescription.

Practical Advice

Possible side effects of the vaccine

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

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the injection was given, nausea, headache, tiredness and aching muscles. More serious side effects are extremely rare and 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.

Pre-vaccination checklist

This checklist helps your doctor/nurse decide about vaccinating you or your child.

Please tell your doctor/nurse if the person about to be vaccinated:

- is unwell today
- has a disease which lowers immunity (eg. leukaemia, cancer, HIV/AIDS) or is having treatment which lowers immunity (eg. oral steroid medicines such as cortisone and prednisone, radiotherapy, chemotherapy)
- has had a severe reaction following any vaccine
- has *any* severe allergies (to anything)
- has had any vaccine in the past month
- has had an injection of immunoglobulin, or received any blood products or a whole blood transfusion within the past year
- is pregnant
- has a past history of Guillain-Barr syndrome
- was a preterm infant
- has a chronic illness
- has a bleeding disorder.

A different vaccine schedule may be recommended if the person to be vaccinated:

- identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- does not have a functioning spleen
- is planning a pregnancy or anticipating parenthood
- is a parent, grandparent or carer of a newborn
- lives with someone who has a disease which lowers immunity (eg. leukaemia, cancer, HIV/AIDS), or lives with someone who is having treatment which lowers immunity (eg. oral steroid medicines such as cortisone and prednisone, radiotherapy, chemotherapy).

Care after vaccination

- For redness or swelling at the injection site, apply a cold compress.
- To lower temperature or relieve discomfort, paracetamol may be given.
- If fever persists, consult your doctor.
- If any reaction occurs that you consider serious or unexpected, seek medical advice.
- Contact the service provider if you or your child has a reaction following vaccination.

Where can I be immunised?

You can be immunised at your local doctor or medical centre. Some councils, community child health and community health centres hold free immunisation clinics. Check with them for details.

Other Resources

For further information please contact:

- your doctor

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- your nearest public health unit
- 13HEALTH (13 43 25 84)
- Immunise Australia National Infoline: 1800 671 811.

Immunise Australia A website about childhood immunisation produced by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing.

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing Information about communicable diseases including vaccine preventable diseases.

Australian Childhood Immunisation Register (ACIR) A website about the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register (ACIR), produced by Medicare Australia.

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

Related Content

[Communicable Diseases factsheet - Whooping cough \(pertussis\)](#)

[Communicable Diseases factsheet – Free Whooping cough Vaccine for New Parents](#)

[Whooping Cough Alert Checklist](#)

[Protect your baby from whooping cough \(brochure\)](#)

[School Based Vaccination Program](#)

National Health and Medical Research Council, 2008. *The Australian Immunisation Handbook (9th Ed.)*