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Health New Zealand
Te Whatu Ora

Whooping cough

Adapted in 2025 by Accessible Formats Service,
Blind Low Vision NZ, Auckland

TN: The logo on the top of the page is Health New Zealand Te Whatu Ora.

Whooping cough

Whooping cough (also called pertussis) is a serious illness, particularly for babies and children. Many people can become so sick with it they need to go to hospital and in some cases, it can cause death.

How does it spread?

Whooping cough spreads easily between people by coughing and sneezing. To help stop it 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. Symptoms 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.

Getting support

If you think you, or someone you care for has whooping cough, contact your GP or healthcare provider for advice urgently. You can also call Healthline on 0800 611 116, anytime 24/7 for free health advice and information.

Your GP or healthcare provider may want to test you to see if you have whooping cough. You may be given antibiotics if you are diagnosed early — it is important you take the full amount prescribed to kill all the bacteria and lower the risk of spreading the infection.

If you, or someone you care for, has 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).

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

Advice for parents and caregivers

Whooping cough can be very serious for babies and children. Around half of the babies who catch whooping cough end up in hospital, and around 1 or 2 in every 100 of those in hospital die from the infection. If a baby 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 sick they need to go to hospital
- develop serious health problems such as pneumonia or brain damage.

Immunisation is the best protection

Immunisation is the best protection against whooping cough. It is especially important for pregnant women, babies and children. Childhood immunisations to protect against whooping cough are given at 6 weeks, 3 months, 5 months, 4 years, and a further booster at age 11 years. It is FREE for all children under 18 and eligible adults.

Whooping cough can make babies really sick, especially those aged under 12 months. When pregnant women are immunised, they protect their baby for the first 6 weeks of life while they are too young to be immunised. It is very important to get immunised during **each** pregnancy. The vaccine is FREE and is available from 13 weeks of pregnancy.

If you are unsure if you or your children 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 Helpline 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
- Call Healthline on **0800 611 116**, anytime 24/7 for free health advice and information about what to do next. 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. This service is

available from 5.00pm - 8.30am on weekdays, and 24 hours a day on weekends and public holidays.

- 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
- Free NZ Relay Services are available at nzrelay.co.nz if you are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have a speech impediment.

End of Whooping cough