

Whooping cough

the hundred-day cough, and why babies matter most

Whooping cough is a bacterial infection causing prolonged, exhausting bouts of coughing that can last three months. In older children and adults it is miserable but rarely dangerous. In young babies it is a different illness altogether, and they usually catch it from an adult who thought they just had a lingering cough.

Call 999 if a baby or child

- has **pauses in breathing**, or stops breathing during or after a coughing bout
- turns **blue or grey** around the lips, or goes floppy
- is **struggling to breathe**, or sucking in below the ribs
- is having **seizures**, or is very difficult to rouse
- is **under six months old with a suspected whooping cough** — seek assessment the same day regardless
- is **not feeding, or vomiting after every cough** and becoming dehydrated

Babies under six months may not whoop at all — they may simply stop breathing between coughs, which is the most dangerous presentation. Most whooping cough deaths are in babies too young to have completed vaccination. In an emergency call 999, or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

How it progresses

1–2 weeks

cold-like symptoms — most infectious stage

2–6 weeks

the coughing bouts, at their worst

Up to 3 months

gradual recovery — the hundred-day cough

- It begins like an ordinary cold — runny nose, mild cough, sometimes a slight fever. This is when it spreads most, and before anyone suspects it.
- Then come **bouts of intense coughing**, often in runs of ten or more, frequently worse at night, leaving the person exhausted and red or blue in the face.

- The **whoop** is the sharp intake of breath at the end of a bout. Many adults and older children never whoop — its absence does not exclude the diagnosis.
- **Vomiting after coughing** is very characteristic and worth mentioning to us.
- Between bouts, people often appear completely well, which is why it is so often dismissed.

Diagnosis and antibiotics

- Diagnosed with a **swab** early in the illness, or a **blood or saliva test** later on.
- **Antibiotics only help if started within about three weeks** of the cough beginning. Given early they shorten the illness; given later they do nothing for symptoms.
- Even late, antibiotics are prescribed to **stop you passing it on**, particularly to babies and pregnant women.
- Household contacts, especially those around babies or in late pregnancy, may be offered preventive antibiotics.
- Cough medicines do not work for whooping cough. Nothing much shortens the cough once established — time is the treatment.

Managing at home

Helps

- Small frequent meals and drinks, since coughing bouts trigger vomiting
- Rest, and sleeping propped up
- Keeping a calm environment — excitement and activity trigger bouts
- Fresh air and avoiding smoke, dust and strong smells
- Recording bouts on your phone to show us — this genuinely aids diagnosis

Avoid

- Cough medicines, which do not work here
- Smoky environments and vaping indoors
- Contact with babies, pregnant women and anyone unwell
- Assuming a lingering cough after a cold is nothing
- Sending a child back to school before the exclusion period ends

Staying away from others

Stay off school, nursery or work until **48 hours after starting antibiotics**, or for **21 days from the start of the cough** if you are not taking them. Whooping cough is a notifiable disease and we are required to inform public health, who will trace and protect close contacts.

Vaccination in pregnancy protects the newborn

The pertussis vaccine is offered in every pregnancy, ideally between 16 and 32 weeks. Antibodies cross the placenta and protect the baby through the first weeks of life, before their own vaccinations begin at eight weeks. It is around 90% effective at preventing whooping cough in young infants and is the single most important protective measure there is. It can still be given later in pregnancy or after birth if it was missed. Protection from childhood vaccination wanes over years, which is why teenagers and adults get whooping cough and pass it on.

Book an appointment if you or your child have had a cough for more than two weeks with bouts, vomiting after coughing, or a whoop, particularly if there is a baby or a pregnant woman in the household. We can test, treat and arrange vaccination, including pertussis vaccination in pregnancy.

Testing and pertussis vaccination in pregnancy

Appointments seven days a week, 9am–7pm, on Whitechapel Road.

Book an appointment

or call 020 7916 0029

Where to get help

Tower Bridge Hospital London

97–99 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DT

020 7916 0029

WhatsApp **07903 284 189**

info@mhwclinic.co.uk

Open 7 days, 9am–7pm

In an emergency

Call 999, or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

When we are closed and it is not an emergency

Call NHS 111 or visit 111.nhs.uk.

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This leaflet is based on current NHS and UKHSA guidance on pertussis and maternal pertussis vaccination. It is general information and does not replace advice from a clinician who has assessed you. If your symptoms change or you are worried, contact us on 020 7916 0029, call NHS 111, or call 999 in an emergency.

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