



Information for healthcare workers exposed to whooping cough

As a healthcare worker you might pass on whooping cough infection to vulnerable patients if you get it yourself. While it can be an unpleasant illness in adults, the risk of severe complications is highest in very young babies.

You should report to your manager and/or occupational health department before attending your work place if you have:

- a cough following recent contact with a case of whooping cough
- any cough which continues for two weeks or more

This is particularly important if you work with babies or pregnant women.

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough, also known as pertussis, is an acute respiratory infection which can be spread by coughing and sneezing. The bacteria are present in the back of the throat and an infected person can pass the infection to other people for 21 days from the onset of their symptoms.

Initial symptoms resemble a common cold, and can progress to include spasmodic coughing, choking spells, and vomiting after coughing. In adults the characteristic “whoop” is often absent; sometimes the only symptom is a cough which may persist for months, and return or get worse after a cold.

The group at highest risk are small infants: nearly 90% of the deaths from whooping cough in the last 10 years have been in infants aged three months or less. Healthcare workers can be an important source of infection to these vulnerable infants.

Antibiotics

Antibiotics are given to cases mainly to prevent them from passing the infection on to others. Antibiotics are of limited value in reducing symptoms or improving



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outcomes unless given early after the onset of the illness. Individuals are no longer infectious after they have completed the recommended course of antibiotic therapy – *Guidelines for Public Health Management of Pertussis*, page 28.

You may be offered antibiotics as “chemoprophylaxis” if you have been in contact with a case. The aim is to reduce the chances of you becoming infected and then passing the infection on to vulnerable contacts or other staff.

Side effects such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and headache can occur from antibiotics administered for whooping cough.

Vaccination

If you have been in contact with a case of whooping cough you may be offered vaccination. The vaccine you will be offered is a combination vaccine, which will protect you against diphtheria, tetanus, polio and whooping cough and is safe and effective in adults.

If you are offered the vaccine, we strongly recommend that you have it so that you are protected against future exposures.

Reporting sick

If you develop symptoms of whooping cough – particularly if you have been exposed to a case – you should contact your manager and/or occupational health department before reporting to work. You should not continue to work whilst infectious, as this would risk infecting vulnerable patients – either directly, or by infecting co-workers who may go on to infect such patients.

Healthcare workers who report sick in these circumstances should not be penalised or stigmatised by their employers or co-workers. You may be excluded from work until you have completed the recommended course of antibiotics.