

Whooping cough

Whooping cough (pertussis) is a bacterial infection of the lungs and breathing tubes. It spreads very easily and can sometimes cause serious problems. It's important for babies and children to get vaccinated against it.

Check if you or your child has whooping cough

The first signs of whooping cough are similar to a [cold](#), such as a runny nose and sore throat (a high temperature is uncommon).

After about a week, you or your child:

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

The cough may last for several weeks or months.

Urgent advice: Ask for an urgent GP appointment or get help from NHS 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.

[Check symptoms on 111 online](#) (for children aged 5 and over) or call 111 (for children under 5).

Whooping cough can be dangerous

Babies under 6 months old with whooping cough have an increased chance of having problems such as:

- [dehydration](#)

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

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

- sore ribs
- [hernia](#)
- [middle ear infections](#)
- pee leaking out when you cough ([urinary incontinence](#))

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

- your or your child's lips, tongue, face or skin suddenly turn blue or grey (on black or brown skin this may be easier to see on the palms of the hands or the soles of the feet)
- 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 seizures (fits)

Find your nearest A&E

Information:

Do not drive to A&E. Ask someone to drive you or call 999 and ask for an ambulance.

Bring any medicines you take with you.

How long whooping cough is contagious

If you have whooping cough, 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.

Important

Stay off school, work or nursery until 48 hours after starting antibiotics, or 3 weeks after your symptoms started if you've not had antibiotics.