

## **Pertussis clinical update**

4 April, 2023

Te Whatu Ora is encouraging healthcare providers and professionals to be alert to the symptoms of pertussis/whooping cough and to encourage prenatal and scheduled childhood immunisations.

This comes following the recent tragic death of another infant from pertussis, following two announced by Te Whatu Ora on [9 March](#). This third death is not related to the two earlier deaths.

There have been 11 cases of whooping cough in 2023 so far. The ratio of fatalities to cases is much higher than in previous years, suggesting there is undetected spread in the community.

Pertussis is serious in very young children – during the last outbreak from October 2017 to May 2019, 50% of children with pertussis, who were aged under 1 year old, required hospitalisation.

### **Diagnosis**

Healthcare providers should consider pertussis as a possible alternative diagnosis, particularly in babies under 3 months with respiratory illness who may not present with the characteristic whoop. Be aware of the red flags of a seriously ill infant:

- Apnoea
- Dehydration
- Lethargy
- Cyanosis or O2 saturations <92%
- Fever > or equal to 38 degrees C

And consider early admission to hospital if any concerning clinical features:

- Poor feeding, with or without reduced urine output
- History of prematurity
- Infants aged < 3 months
- Children with a history of chronic respiratory disease, cardiac disease, neuromuscular disease, or immune deficiency
- Reduced alertness and responsiveness
- Repeat presentations in this illness

Any child less than 3 months of age with respiratory symptoms, whose caregiver has presented them for triage (via phone) should have a low threshold for offering an in-person assessment.

### **Vaccination**

Free antenatal pertussis vaccination, with Boostrix®, is available from general practice and through many pharmacies across New Zealand. It can be given from the second trimester of **every pregnancy** and is recommended to have from 16 weeks, but at least 2 weeks before birth.

Immunisation is available at medical centres, Hauora and Pacific health providers and at some pharmacies and free for:

- Babies at six weeks, three months and five months. Booster doses are then given at four and 11 years old
- Pregnant people for every pregnancy, from 16 weeks
- Adults at 45 and 65 years of age (same vaccine as the tetanus booster)
- Some groups who are at higher risk of becoming very unwell if they catch whooping cough.

Pertussis vaccination should be encouraged for the extended whānau of pregnant people, new babies and infants although depending on their age they may not be eligible for a funded vaccine.

It is safe to get the vaccination again if you aren't sure.

### **Healthcare workers**

Healthcare workers should consider their own immunisation status, as immunity only lasts 5-10 years. Booster vaccinations are recommended every 10 years for all lead maternity carers and other healthcare personnel who work in neonatal units and other clinical settings (such as GPs, practice nurses and Well Child providers), where they are exposed to infants.

Use of standard and transmission-based precautions (droplet) are required when providing care for an unwell child, baby or adult who has pertussis. These include a medical mask as a minimum and eye protection. Use of a P2/N95 particulate respirator can be used if preferred.

Follow good hand hygiene practices through use of alcohol-based hand sanitiser or washing and drying hands thoroughly if hands are visibly soiled.

Infection prevention and control - standard and transmission-based precautions [here](#)

### **More information**

- View the whooping cough pathway on your local HealthPathways site for information
- Immunisation resources are available to download [here](#)
- Visit [immunise.health.nz](https://immunise.health.nz) for up-to-date vaccination information