

Pertussis (Whooping Cough) Prevention and Management

Situation update and guidance for education and early years settings and professionals

City & Hackney Public Health

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There has been a sharp rise in whooping cough cases in recent months across the country

SITUATION UPDATE

NATIONAL

- Whooping cough rates have risen sharply in recent months, with [4,793 cases confirmed between January and March 2024 nationwide](#).
- This is compared to 858 cases reported to the UK Health Security Agency over 2023.
- Sadly during the first quarter of 2024, there have been 5 infant deaths.
- This rise is linked to a number of factors:
 - Whooping cough is a cyclical disease that peaks every 3 to 5 years
 - Sub-optimal vaccination coverage both among young children and pregnant women

LOCAL

- In 2024, whooping cough cases have been high in Hackney compared to other London boroughs. There have some cases in the City of London.
- Hackney remains at particular risk due to a downward trend in uptake of the routine childhood immunisation programme and low uptake of the antenatal vaccine.
- Uptake for the 6-in-1 vaccine, which includes whooping cough currently stands at 67.8% (when measured at 1 year), significantly below the national average of 91.8%, and 95% target for herd immunity.
- Coverage in pregnant women in the North East London ICB for for Jan-March 2023 was 29.2%.

Whooping cough can be life threatening, especially to young unimmunised infants

OVERVIEW OF WHOOPING COUGH

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a bacterial infection of the lungs and airways.

Symptoms start with mild, cold-like symptoms, and can turn into severe coughing fits over one to two weeks.

Whooping cough is spread through coughs and sneezes.

People with whooping cough are most contagious up to about 3 weeks after the cough begins.

Who is most at risk?



Babies too young to get vaccinated, especially if their mothers have not been vaccinated are at-risk.

People who might spread whooping cough to those at-risk include:



- Parents
- Pregnant women
- Healthcare workers
- Anyone living with a baby too young to be vaccinated

Prevention and Control

Young infants can get a vaccine at 8, 12 and 16 weeks old, with a pre-school booster at 3 years and 4 months.

Pregnant women can get a vaccine between 16 and 32 weeks of pregnancy, but it can also be given up until labour.

Confirmed cases will have to be excluded for 48 hours after starting antibiotics, or for 3 weeks from when symptoms began if not taking antibiotics.

Uptake of the maternal and infant vaccine programme is the best protection against whooping cough.

ACTIONS TO PREVENT WHOOPING COUGH IN YOUR SETTING

- Promote awareness of the childhood immunisation programme (and the need for three doses of the whooping cough vaccine at 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age, as well as the preschool booster from 3 years and 4 months).
- Ask pregnant staff to check their own whooping cough vaccination status and speak to their GP or midwife if they are not up to date.
- Encourage the following infection prevention and control tips:
 - Promote hand washing with liquid soap and warm water.
 - Supervise and/or encourage children to wash their hands regularly, using paper towels or hand dryers for drying hands (with waste paper bin provided for disposal of towels).
 - Remind staff to wash their hands throughout the day.
 - Encourage good respiratory hygiene, using and disposing of tissues in the bin, followed by hand washing.

Contact the North London Health Protection Team on 0300 3030 450 if you suspect a case of whooping cough in your setting.

MANAGING WHOOPING COUGH IN YOUR SETTING

Signs and symptoms

- The first symptoms of whooping cough are similar to a common cold, with a runny nose and a mild fever.
- After about a week or two, the characteristic cough develops with uncontrolled bouts of intense coughing that can last for several minutes, sometimes causing vomiting. Coughing is often worse overnight, and can cause some people to make a distinctive "whooping" sound as they gasp for breath between coughs.

Contact the North London Health Protection Team (HPT) if you are made aware of any likely or confirmed cases of whooping cough among people who have attended your setting.

- The HPT will advise of any measures and may convene a multi-agency meeting in certain situations.
- Please note, the HPT may request details of a child and the contact details of the parent. This information can be shared with the HPT without having to seek the parent's consent, and seeking consent should not delay the risk assessment.
- Telephone: 0300 3030 450 (includes out of hours)
- Email: london.region@ukhsa.gov.uk OR phe.london.region@nhs.net for patient identifiable information (PII) - remember not to include PII in the subject line of an email

The whooping cough vaccine is given as part of the routine childhood immunisation schedule, and is offered prenatally.

KEY PUBLIC HEALTH MESSAGES

- Whooping cough is a bacterial infection of the lungs and airways. It spreads very easily through coughing and sneezing and can sometimes cause serious health problems, especially in babies who are too young to start their vaccinations.
- Vaccination is the best defence against whooping cough. The whooping cough vaccine is given as part of the routine childhood vaccination schedule in the UK, at 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age, with a booster offered at preschool. Parents can verify their child's status by checking their child's red book or contacting their GP surgery; it is never too late to get up to date.
- Pregnant women can help protect their babies by getting vaccinated. Getting vaccinated during pregnancy produces antibodies that pass to the baby to give them high levels of protection until they're able to have their own vaccination. The best time to get vaccinated is between 16 to 32 weeks. Mums-to-be can contact their midwife or GP surgery if they are unsure whether they have had the vaccine.
- 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

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Pertussis guidelines for public health management](#)
- [Pertussis: guidance, data and analysis](#)
- [Confirmed cases of pertussis in England by month](#)
- [Pertussis communication and social media assets](#)