Description
Whooping cough (or pertussis) is a highly contagious respiratory infection caused by bacteria. It can affect babies, children and adults. For adolescents and adults the infection may only be a persistent cough, however for young children whooping cough can be life threatening. The cough can obstruct a baby’s breathing and they may lack oxygen and become blue.

Symptoms
Whooping cough may start like a cold, with a runny nose and sneezing, and then the characteristic cough develops. These coughing bouts can be very severe and frightening, and may end with a crowing noise (the whoop). This occurs as air is drawn back into the chest, and can be followed by vomiting or gagging. In young infants, as well as older children and adults, the typical symptoms may not be present. After exposure to the bacteria, it usually takes nine to ten days to become ill.

Transmission
The bacteria are spread by an infected person coughing or sneezing. Direct contact with infected secretions from the mouth or nose can also pass on the infection. A person is highly infectious for the first two weeks of their cough. After three weeks of coughing, the person is regarded as non-infectious, even though coughing may last up to three months.

Treatment
Treatment is a full course of antibiotics which reduces the time a person is infectious to others. Antibiotics need to be given within 21 days of the start of general symptoms or within 14 days of the start of the cough. Antibiotics reduce symptoms if given when infection is developing, after contact with a person with pertussis and in the early coughing stage. For further information please contact your local doctor, community health centre, nearest population health unit or contact the 13HEALTH information line (13 432584).