

Whooping Cough and your Voice

Recent media reports demonstrate a high incidence of whooping cough in NSW as well as other parts of Australia. The impact of whooping cough on the voice of a teacher can be significant and can be extremely debilitating. Just because you were immunised as a child does not give you life long protection. Boosters are available through your GP.

The symptoms

Whooping cough usually begins with all or some of the following symptoms: a cold, runny nose, fatigue, loss of appetite and a fever. Then the cough develops there can be long bursts of coughing (up to several minutes long). The cough is often worse at night and sometimes triggered by cold air. In adults the cough may be mild but in more severe cases coughing is extremely debilitating even to the point of coughing till you vomit. There are several spells of coughing each hour with up to 25 spells each day. The whoop or gasp is not always evident in adults and hence not always diagnosed early. The cough may last for 3 months.

Voice symptoms

Severe bouts of coughing have a detrimental effect on the voice. I have seen a large number of clients with voice problems post whooping cough. When you cough you slam your vocal folds together and this can cause irritation of the delicate tissue resulting in voice changes, such as hoarseness, huskiness or croakiness, changes in pitch or difficulty getting a loud voice. If not treated appropriately, these changes can have long term effect on the voice.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Your doctor will recommend a swab from your throat or blood test to confirm the diagnosis; you are infectious for about 3 weeks from onset of the symptoms. If the illness is treated with an effective antibiotic early (often erythromycin), you will usually stop being infectious within 5 days.

If your voice is effected talk to a speech pathologist on how to protect your voice once you return to teaching, you may need to see an Ear Nose and Throat specialist to ensure your vocal folds are healthy

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