

# Whooping cough (Pertussis) vaccine for parents

**If you are planning a pregnancy, are pregnant or have recently given birth, this information is for you.**

Most adults are not sufficiently vaccinated for whooping cough.

If you are pregnant, we strongly recommend that you are vaccinated against whooping cough (pertussis). It takes around two weeks for the vaccine to work.

The whooping cough vaccination is free for those who are pregnant. It is recommended you have the vaccination between weeks 20 to 32 of your pregnancy. It is also recommended you have a vaccination for each pregnancy, regardless of the number of pregnancies or time between pregnancies. The vaccine can be given any time up to delivery, or as soon possible after the baby is born if missed earlier in your pregnancy. The protection for your baby is less if given within two weeks of birth or after their birth.

If you are pregnant, the whooping cough vaccine is free, but some providers may charge a fee to give the vaccination.

Partners (if you have one) and other close contacts can be vaccinated for their own health protection, but there will be a cost. The vaccination is free for the pregnant person only.

## Did you know?

- Approximately 1 in every 200 children infected with whooping cough and under the age of six months, will die. Those under three months are particularly at risk.
- Most babies get whooping cough from their parents.

- Immunisation for whooping cough is very effective, but babies are at a higher risk of infection until their third dose of the vaccine at six months.
- Immunisation during your pregnancy provides antibodies to protect your baby in their first six months until the routine three doses of childhood whooping cough vaccine are complete.

Whooping cough in babies is very serious with many babies needing to be hospitalised.

Vaccination during pregnancy is the best way to reduce the chance of your baby getting whooping cough.

## What is whooping cough?

- A highly infectious disease that damages breathing (respiratory) passages. It is very serious in babies under six months of age.
- Produces severe coughing sometimes resulting in a gasping for breath (the whoop).
- Coughing may be followed by vomiting.
- The cough can last for months.
- Babies less than six months and adults often do not have the characteristic whoop.
- It is caused by a bacteria called *Bordetella pertussis*.

## How is whooping cough spread?

- By respiratory droplets.
- Parents and family are the main sources of infection for babies.

## When is whooping cough infectious?

- The incubation period is about 14 days (between day 6 and 20 after exposure).
- It is highly infectious in the early stage before the cough develops.
- Appropriate antibiotics can decrease the infectious period if started early in the illness. All whooping cough cases should be considered infectious until five days after commencing antibiotics.
- People are no longer infectious after three weeks, even though the cough persists.

## Who is affected by whooping cough?

- Babies less than six months are most at risk.
- All three whooping cough vaccinations are necessary to provide the best protection. Any child who has received less than three doses is also at risk of developing whooping cough.
- The vaccine is 70–80 per cent effective, so people immunised against whooping cough can still contract the disease but are likely to have a less severe illness.
- Anyone in your household who is not immunised or not immune has a 70–100 per cent chance of getting whooping cough if they are exposed.
- A child in school who is not immunised or not immune has a 50–80 per cent chance of being infected if they are exposed.

## How is whooping cough prevented?

- Immunisation is the best way to minimise the risk of infection. It is strongly recommended for:
  - All children as part of their routine immunisation schedule. Babies are given the primary vaccine doses at 6–8 weeks, 4 and 6 months.

Children receive booster doses at 18 months and at 4 years of age and again in secondary school.

- Those who are pregnant. The whooping cough vaccination should be given during each pregnancy, ideally between 20–32 weeks of the pregnancy. If vaccination does not occur during pregnancy, immunisation is recommended as soon as possible after the baby is born.
- Other adults wishing to protect themselves from whooping cough, or those in contact with your baby (other parent, grandparents, etc.) if 10 years have passed since their previous dose. The vaccine is not free for any of these people. Some vaccine providers may supply the vaccine at a discounted rate to Health Care Card holders. Check with your provider if you have a Health Care Card.
- Antibiotics have little effect on the clinical course of the disease but can reduce the risk of spreading it to others if started within 21 days of the cough commencing.

Immunity to whooping cough is achieved by vaccination or exposure to the disease. To maintain immunity all adults should have repeat vaccination every 10 years.

Vaccines include Boostrix® and Adacel®. These are dTpa; diphtheria-tetanus-acellular pertussis vaccines.

- There is evidence to show that dTpa vaccines are safe in pregnancy.

## If you have any questions

Talk with your doctor, midwife or nurse.

*Disclaimer:* This fact sheet provides general information only. For specific advice about your or your baby's healthcare needs, you should seek advice from your health professional. The Royal Women's Hospital does not accept any responsibility for loss or damage arising from your reliance on this fact sheet instead of seeing a health professional. If you or your baby require urgent medical attention, please contact your nearest emergency department.  
© The Royal Women's Hospital 2014–2023