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Pregnancy and baby



Whooping cough vaccination in pregnancy

There's a lot of whooping cough (pertussis) around at the moment and babies who are too young to start their vaccinations are at greatest risk.

Young babies with whooping cough are often very unwell and most will be admitted to hospital because of their illness. When whooping cough is particularly severe, they can die.

Pregnant women can safely help protect their babies by getting vaccinated – ideally when they are 28-32 weeks pregnant, although they may be given the vaccine up to 38 weeks of pregnancy.

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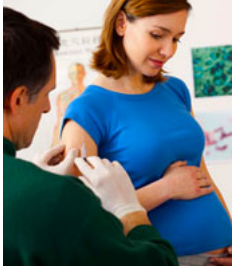
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Why are pregnant women advised to have the whooping cough vaccine?

Getting vaccinated while you're pregnant is highly effective at protecting your baby from developing whooping cough in the first few weeks of their life.

The immunity you get from the vaccine will pass to your baby through the placenta and provide passive protection for them until they are old enough to be routinely vaccinated against whooping cough at two months old.

Is the whooping cough vaccine safe in pregnancy?



It's understandable that you might have concerns about the safety of having a vaccine during pregnancy, but there's no evidence to suggest the whooping cough vaccine is unsafe for you or your unborn baby.

Pertussis-containing vaccine (whooping cough vaccine) has been used routinely in pregnant women in the UK since October 2012, and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is carefully monitoring its safety. The [MHRA's study of around 20,000 vaccinated women](#) has found no evidence of risks to pregnancy or babies.

The study looked at several outcomes, including stillbirth, premature birth, death of the baby within 28 days of birth, foetal distress, caesarean delivery, low birthweight, or renal (kidney) failure in the baby, all serious events that can occur naturally in pregnancy.

The results showed that in women given whooping cough vaccination in the third trimester (after 28 weeks), there is no evidence of an increased risk of any of these outcomes. Rates of normal, healthy births were similar to those seen in unvaccinated women.

To date, around 60% of eligible pregnant women (over half a million) have received the whooping cough vaccine with no safety concerns being identified in the baby or mother.

A number of other countries, including the US and New Zealand, currently recommend vaccination against whooping cough in pregnancy.

Is whooping cough vaccination in pregnancy working?

Yes, it is. Published research from the UK vaccination programme shows that vaccinating pregnant women against whooping cough has been highly effective in protecting young babies until they can have their first vaccination when they are two months old.

Babies born to women vaccinated at least a week before birth had a 91% reduced risk of becoming ill with whooping cough in their first weeks of life, compared to babies whose mothers had not been vaccinated.

An additional benefit is that the protection the mother receives from the vaccination will lower her own risk of infection and of passing whooping cough on to her baby.

Which whooping cough vaccine will I be given?

As there is no whooping cough-only vaccine, the vaccine you'll be given also protects against polio, diphtheria and tetanus. Until July 2014, a vaccine called Repevax was used, but from July 2014 the vaccine you'll be offered is called Boostrix IPV.

Boostrix IPV is similar to the [4-in-1 vaccine](#) – the pre-school booster that's routinely given to children before they start school.

Why is Boostrix IPV replacing Repevax as the recommended vaccine?

Repevax and Boostrix IPV both protect against whooping cough, diphtheria, tetanus and polio, but they are made by different manufacturers.

The vaccine has changed from Repevax to Boostrix IPV because Public Health England (the organisation that selects which vaccines to buy and use) has judged it delivers the best value to the NHS. To select which vaccine to buy and use, Public Health England uses a rigorous process for the selection in line with European Union (EU) legislation.

But the manufacturer's leaflet says there's no information on the use of Boostrix IPV in pregnancy. Should it be used in pregnancy?

The licence for Boostrix IPV allows for its use in pregnancy when clearly needed, and when the possible benefits outweigh the possible risks.

It is standard practice with most medicines not to test them on pregnant women. This is why the manufacturer's information leaflet includes this statement, and not because of any specific safety concerns or evidence of harm in pregnancy.

Pertussis-containing vaccine has been used routinely in pregnant women in the UK since October 2012 and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is carefully monitoring its safety. The MHRA's study of around 20,000 women vaccinated with Repevax found no evidence of risks to pregnancy or pregnancy outcome.

Boostrix (similar to Boostrix IPV but without the polio component) is one of the vaccines routinely recommended in the US for immunisation of pregnant women. Experience in the US has identified no safety concerns with the use of the vaccine in pregnancy.

There is no evidence of risk to the pregnant woman or unborn child with inactivated vaccines like Boostrix IPV. An inactivated vaccine is one that does not contain "live" vaccine. You can find out more about [inactivated and "live" vaccines](#).

What are the side effects of the whooping cough vaccine?

You may have some mild side effects such as swelling, redness or tenderness where the vaccine is injected in your upper arm just as you would with any vaccine. These only last a few days. Other side effects can include fever, irritation at the injection site, swelling of the vaccinated arm, loss of appetite,

irritability and headache. Serious side effects are extremely rare.

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (medically known as pertussis) is a serious infection that causes long bouts of coughing and choking, making it hard to breathe. The "whoop" is caused by gasping for breath after each bout of coughing, though babies don't always make this noise.

Read more about [whooping cough symptoms](#).

Should I be concerned about whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a highly infectious, serious illness that can lead to [pneumonia](#) and brain damage, particularly in young babies. Most babies with whooping cough will need hospital treatment, and when whooping cough is very severe they may die.

You may have thought that whooping cough had died out but it increased substantially in 2012, with more than 9,000 cases altogether in England. In babies under three months old, 400 had whooping cough and 14 died.

Research from the vaccination programme in England shows that vaccinating pregnant women against whooping cough has been highly effective in protecting young babies until they can receive their own vaccinations from two months of age.

In keeping with usual disease patterns in England, whooping cough cases have fallen in all age groups since 2012. The greatest fall has been in young babies targeted by the pregnancy vaccination programme. Cases of whooping cough in older age groups are still high compared to pre-2012 levels.

Babies can be infected by people with whooping cough in these older age groups, so it is still important for pregnant women to be vaccinated to protect their babies.

[Watch a video](#) describing how nasty whooping cough can be

But aren't babies vaccinated against whooping cough to protect them?

Yes, they are, but the babies that have been getting whooping cough are generally too young to have started their normal vaccinations so they are not protected against the disease.

So, how can I protect my baby?

The only way you can help protect your baby from getting whooping cough in their first few weeks after birth is by having the whooping cough vaccination yourself while you are pregnant.

After vaccination, your body produces antibodies to protect against whooping cough. You will then pass some immunity to your unborn baby.

Will the whooping cough vaccine in pregnancy give me whooping cough?

No. The whooping cough vaccine is not a "live" vaccine. This means it doesn't contain whooping cough (or polio, diphtheria or tetanus), and can't cause whooping cough in you, or in your baby.

When should I have the whooping cough vaccine?

The best time to get vaccinated to protect your baby is between 28 and 32 weeks of pregnancy. This maximises the chance that your baby will be protected from birth, through the transfer of your antibodies before he or she is born.

You can still have the vaccine after 38 weeks but this is not ideal as your baby is less likely to be protected by your immunity. At this stage of pregnancy, having the vaccination may not directly protect your baby but would help protect you from whooping cough and from passing it on to your baby.

Will my baby still need to be vaccinated against whooping cough at two months if I've had the vaccine while pregnant?

Yes. Whenever you have the whooping cough vaccine, your baby will still need to be vaccinated according to the normal [NHS vaccination schedule](#) when they reach two months old. Babies are protected against whooping cough by the [5-in-1 vaccine](#).

Can I have the whooping cough vaccine at the same time as the flu jab?

Yes, you can have the whooping cough vaccine when you get the flu vaccine, but do not delay your [flu jab](#) so that you can have both at the same time.

How can I get the whooping cough vaccination?

You may be offered the vaccination at a routine antenatal appointment when you are between 28 and 38 weeks pregnant.

If you are more than 28 weeks pregnant and have not been offered the vaccine, talk to your midwife or GP and make an appointment to get vaccinated.

I was vaccinated against whooping cough as a child, do I need to get vaccinated again?

Yes, because any protection you may have had through either having whooping cough or being vaccinated when you were young is likely to have worn off and will not provide sufficient protection for your baby.

I was vaccinated against whooping cough in a previous pregnancy, do I need to be vaccinated in my current pregnancy?

Yes, you should get re-vaccinated from week 28 of any pregnancy.

How do I spot whooping cough in my baby?

Be alert to the signs and symptoms of whooping cough, which include severe coughing fits that may be accompanied by difficulty breathing (or pauses in breathing in young infants) or vomiting after coughing, and the characteristic "whoop" sound.

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