



Whooping Cough Vaccine for Pregnant Women



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

What is whooping cough (pertussis)?

Whooping cough (also known as pertussis) is a highly contagious illness that can be life threatening. The disease is most serious in babies less than 6 months of age – many babies are hospitalised with complications such as pneumonia and brain damage.

Babies less than 6 months of age are too young to be fully vaccinated.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough?

Whooping cough causes long bouts of coughing and choking making it hard to breathe. The 'whoop' sound is caused by gasping for air between coughing spells. A child with whooping cough may turn blue from lack of air, or vomit after a coughing spell.

Not all children get the 'whoop' and often older children and adults just have a cough.

The disease can last up to three months.

Infection with whooping cough does not give long lasting protection so re-infections can happen.

How does whooping cough spread?

Whooping cough is spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing or close contact.

Someone with whooping cough can spread the disease for up to three weeks after the start of the cough.

Many babies who get whooping cough have been in contact with family members who have had a cough for longer than 2 weeks.

How can whooping cough be prevented?

The best way to prevent whooping cough is by vaccination.

Whooping cough vaccine is offered to all children

- as part of the 6 in 1 vaccine at 2, 4 and 6 months of age
- at 4-5 years of age (4 in 1 vaccine)
- in 1st year of second level school (Tdap vaccine)

All children should get these vaccines on time to protect them and babies too young to be vaccinated.

How does the whooping cough vaccine protect you and your baby?

The vaccine stimulates your immune system to produce high levels of antibodies to the whooping cough bacteria. These antibodies will also pass to your baby in the womb and protect them during the first few months of life.

If you or your baby are in contact with whooping cough the antibodies will attack these bacteria and will protect you and your baby from whooping cough.

The antibodies you pass to your baby in the womb decline rapidly in the first six months of life so it is important your baby gets the routine childhood vaccines (which include whooping cough vaccine) on time at 2, 4 and 6 months.

How often should pregnant women get the vaccine?

The antibodies you develop after vaccination decline over time so you need to get the vaccine again in your next pregnancy. You should get whooping cough vaccine during every pregnancy so that high levels of these antibodies are passed to each of your babies in the womb.

What vaccine should pregnant women get?

You should get a Tdap vaccine. This is a low dose tetanus (T), diphtheria (d) and acellular pertussis (ap) booster vaccine which protects against tetanus, diphtheria and whooping cough (pertussis).

When should I get the whooping cough vaccine?

The best time to get the whooping cough vaccine is between 16-36 weeks of your pregnancy. Giving the vaccine at this time will give your baby the best protection. The vaccine can be given after 36 weeks but it may be less effective.

Is there anyone who cannot get the vaccine?

The vaccine should not be given to

- those with a history of a severe allergic (anaphylaxis) reaction to a previous dose of whooping cough vaccine or any part of the vaccine.

It is not recommended

- if there is a history of a severe local reaction to a previous dose. You should not get a tetanus or diphtheria containing vaccine more often than every 10 years if you have a severe local reaction.

When should vaccination be postponed?

There are very few reasons why vaccination should be postponed. Vaccination should be rescheduled if you have an acute illness with a temperature greater than 38°C.

What can I expect following vaccination?

You may get soreness or redness around the injection site. You may experience a mild generalised reaction of fever and fatigue for up to 48 hours after receiving the vaccine.

What if I don't feel well after vaccination?

If you have a temperature after the vaccine, take paracetamol, as it is safe in pregnancy, and it's important for you and your baby to avoid fever.

Do not take ibuprofen or aspirin (unless advised by your obstetrician). Remember if you are unwell after getting a vaccine, it could be for some other reasons – don't assume it's the vaccine and seek medical advice if needed.

Is it safe for pregnant women to be vaccinated?

Yes. The vaccine is safe for pregnant women. Whooping cough vaccine is recommended for pregnant women in the UK, US, New Zealand and Australia.

This whooping cough vaccine has been studied in pregnant women in the US and no risk has been found. Reactions are generally mild and serious side effects are very rare.

Can the vaccine give me whooping cough?

No. The vaccine cannot give you whooping cough because it does not contain any live bacteria.

My baby was premature so what can I do?

Babies born before 32 weeks will not be protected as they will not get enough antibodies from you while in the womb.

The best way to protect them is

- to make sure other children in the house are fully vaccinated.
- to make sure all adults in the house get a whooping cough vaccine if they haven't had one in the last 10 years. Ideally they should get the vaccine 2 weeks before contact with the baby.
- to keep your baby away from anyone with a cough until they have had two of their routine vaccinations (at 4 months of age).

How do I get vaccinated?

Contact your GP or maternity hospital to arrange for vaccination.

The vaccine is free but you will be charged for the administration (even if you have a medical or doctor only card).