

Introduction

The routine childhood immunisation programme has been very effective in reducing the overall numbers of cases of pertussis. Before the introduction of routine immunisation against pertussis in the 1950s, large epidemics occurred every three to five years affecting up to 150,000 people and contributed to about 300 deaths each year in the UK. In comparison, over the last ten years (2002 to 2011) there have been on average 800 cases of pertussis with over 300 babies needing admission to hospital and four babies dying each year in England and Wales.

However, there was a considerable increase in pertussis activity across the UK starting in mid-2011. The outbreak was the largest seen in the UK for over a decade. In Northern Ireland 314 cases of confirmed pertussis were notified to PHA in 2012 compared to 15 the year before, and 70 of these were in babies aged under 3 months old. A programme was therefore introduced to protect vulnerable babies from pertussis by offering vaccine to their mothers during pregnancy. In 2012, fourteen infant deaths were reported in England and Wales from pertussis and all deaths occurred in infants who were born before the introduction of the pertussis vaccine programme for pregnant women. Up to 31 October 2014, 10 deaths were reported in infants with confirmed whooping cough who were born after the introduction of the maternal programme. Nine of these 10 infants were born to unvaccinated mothers and all 10 infants were too young to have received their first dose of pertussis-containing vaccine and be fully protected by vaccination themselves. The vaccination programme has been successful in reducing the

number of babies infected with pertussis before they are old enough to be vaccinated, with less than 10 cases per year in Northern Ireland in babies under three months old in 2013 and 2014. The number of cases have increased since then, but 60% of cases at six months old were born to mothers who had not received the pertussis vaccine during pregnancy. It is therefore important to offer pertussis vaccination for each pregnancy.

Young infants are particularly vulnerable to complications, hospitalisation and death from pertussis. Vaccinating pregnant women against pertussis should help provide their newborn infants with protection against serious complications from pertussis until they can receive their routine immunisations from two months of age. This factsheet provides information on the disease, the vaccine and immunisation programme and a section on frequently asked questions.

The disease

What is pertussis?

Pertussis (commonly known as whooping cough) is an infection caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*.

What are the symptoms of pertussis?

Pertussis causes an irritating cough that often develops into prolonged bouts of coughing. In children, the bouts of coughing are commonly followed by a characteristic 'whoop' sound (except in infants) and may be accompanied by vomiting. In adolescents and adults, the symptoms may only be a prolonged cough.

Whooping Cough (Pertussis) immunisation for pregnant women - factsheet for healthcare professionals

This factsheet provides information and encourages uptake of the whooping cough vaccine for pregnant women. Cases of whooping cough are on the increase – by getting the vaccine while pregnant you can protect your baby.

Currently being updated - check back soon for the latest update.

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