

# Whooping cough (Pertussis)

**If you are pregnant you should get vaccinated to protect your baby**



Public Health  
Agency

## **Cases of whooping cough started to increase from early 2024 – by getting the vaccine while pregnant, you can protect your baby.**

In Northern Ireland there has been a sharp rise in the number of confirmed whooping cough cases since the beginning of 2024. This has also been seen across the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe. The reasons for the increasing number of cases are not fully understood, however the low case numbers seen during the COVID-19 pandemic and the fall in uptake of pertussis vaccines may have contributed.

## **Young babies are particularly at risk because they are vulnerable until they can start to be vaccinated against whooping cough at two months of age.**

You can help protect your unborn baby from getting whooping cough in the weeks after birth by having the whooping cough vaccination while you are pregnant. Even if you've been vaccinated before or have had whooping cough yourself, you still need to get this vaccine in every pregnancy.

## What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough is a serious disease that causes long bouts of coughing and choking, making it hard to breathe. The 'whoop' noise is caused by gasping for breath after each bout of coughing. Whooping cough commonly lasts for two to three months. Young babies are most at risk from whooping cough. For these babies, the disease is very serious and can lead to pneumonia and permanent brain damage. In the worst cases, it can cause death.

## How does getting vaccinated during pregnancy protect my baby?

The immunity (antibodies) you develop from the vaccine will be passed to your baby through the placenta. This will help protect your baby in the first few vulnerable weeks of life until he or she is old enough to have the vaccination themselves. Babies are offered whooping cough vaccination at 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age as part of their routine immunisations.

## When should I get the vaccine?

The best time to get vaccinated to protect your baby is from week 16 of your pregnancy. If you are in week 16 of your pregnancy, speak to your GP about arranging to get the vaccine.

If you are in the later stages of your pregnancy it is still worth getting the vaccine. If you get the vaccine less than two weeks before giving birth, antibodies may not have time to develop and be passed to your baby in sufficient quantities. However it will still help protect you and reduce the risk of you infecting your baby.

Your baby will still need to be vaccinated as normal starting at 8 weeks old.

## Are there any risks to me or my baby if I'm vaccinated while I'm pregnant?

The whooping cough vaccine is not a live vaccine so it can't cause whooping cough in you or your baby. No evidence of risk has been found from pregnant women receiving pertussis vaccine in pregnancy. In the UK, a large study by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) found no risks to pregnancy associated with the vaccine and rates of normal healthy births were no different to those in women who did not receive the vaccine. It's much safer for you to have the vaccination than to risk your newborn baby catching whooping cough.

## **What vaccine will I be given?**

No single whooping cough vaccine is available. You will be given a vaccine that also protects against diphtheria, and tetanus. This and similar vaccines have been used widely in many countries. They have been given to children, adults and pregnant women.

## **Are there any side effects from being vaccinated?**

You may have some mild side effects from the vaccination, such as swelling, redness or tenderness where the vaccine was given. Serious side effects are extremely rare.

## **I'm still concerned about having a vaccination while I'm pregnant. Is there an alternative way to protect my baby from whooping cough?**

No. Recently some young babies have died before they were old enough to have their first whooping cough vaccination. Having the vaccination during pregnancy provides antibodies that will be passed to the baby so he or she has some protection in the first few weeks of life when whooping cough is most serious.

### **I am going to breastfeed. Won't that protect my baby?**

No, not enough immunity against whooping cough is passed in breastmilk to protect your baby.

### **Why can't my baby be vaccinated as soon as he or she is born?**

Newborn babies don't make good responses to this vaccine. The earliest your baby can get the vaccine is at 8 weeks old and four doses are needed to get full protection.

### **Will the vaccination definitely mean my baby doesn't get whooping cough?**

No vaccination guarantees 100% protection, but this programme has been in place since 2012 and published studies have shown that the vaccine is over 90% effective in protecting your baby from whooping cough until his or her vaccinations start at 8 weeks of age. Having the vaccine is the best way to protect your baby until his or her routine vaccination.

**I have heard that I should have the flu vaccine when I am pregnant. Can I have the vaccines at the same time?**

If you are pregnant during the autumn flu vaccine season, then you should have the flu vaccine as early as possible. If you are over 16 weeks pregnant, then you can and should have both vaccines. You can have them at the same time or separately; the vaccines don't interfere with each other if given together. You can have the flu vaccine at any stage of pregnancy.

**What should I do now?**

If you are in week 16 of your pregnancy or beyond, speak with your GP or midwife to arrange your vaccination and discuss any queries you may have.

**Where can I get more information?**

More information on whooping cough and the vaccination programme can be found at:  
[www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorates/public-health/health-protection/respiratory-diseases/whooping-cough](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorates/public-health/health-protection/respiratory-diseases/whooping-cough)



**Public Health Agency**

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

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