

Pertussis vaccine uptake in pregnancy

What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough 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 do not always make this noise. It spreads very easily and can sometimes cause serious problems, which is why it's important for babies and children to get vaccinated against it.

What are the symptoms of whooping cough? How do I tell it apart from a normal cough?

The first signs of whooping cough are similar to a cold, such as a runny nose and sore throat. After about a week, you or your child:

- will get coughing bouts that last for a few minutes and are worse at night
- may make a "whoop" sound – a gasp for breath between coughs (young babies and some adults may not "whoop")
- may have difficulty breathing after a coughing bout and may turn blue or grey (young infants)
- may bring up a thick mucus, which can make you vomit
- may become very red in the face (more common in adults)

The cough may last for several weeks or months.

Babies under 6 months old with whooping cough have an increased chance of having problems such as:

- dehydration
- breathing difficulties
- pneumonia
- seizures (fits).

Why do I need to get the whooping cough vaccine in pregnancy?

Whooping cough in babies under six months can be dangerous. The immunity you get from the vaccine passes to your baby through the placenta and protects them until they are old enough to be vaccinated at 8 weeks old. They will then receive the vaccine as part of the routine 6-in-1 vaccine – for babies at 8, 12 and 16 weeks.

Is the vaccine safe in pregnancy?

Vaccination during pregnancy boosts your antibodies which are then passed to your baby to help protect them from the day they are born.

Pertussis-containing vaccine (whooping cough vaccine) has been used routinely in pregnant women in the UK since October 2012. There is no evidence to suggest that the whooping cough vaccine is unsafe for you or your unborn baby and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is continuously monitoring its safety.

The MHRA's study of around 20,000 vaccinated women published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) found no evidence of risks to pregnancy or babies.

Can me or my baby get whooping cough from the vaccine during pregnancy?

The whooping cough vaccine is not a live vaccine so it can't cause whooping cough in you or your baby if you have the vaccine. It's safer for you to have the vaccine than to risk your newborn baby catching whooping cough.

How can I get the whooping cough vaccination?

You will normally receive your whooping cough vaccine around the time of your mid-pregnancy scan (usually 20 weeks), but you can receive it from 16 weeks. If you have reached 20 weeks of pregnancy and have not yet been offered the whooping cough vaccine, please ask your GP surgery or midwife.

To give your baby the best protection, you should try and get the vaccine before 32 weeks but if you have missed out you can still have it later. You can even have it after you give birth, to reduce your risk of spreading whooping cough to your baby.

Will my baby still need to be vaccinated against whooping cough at 8 weeks 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 8 weeks old. Babies are protected against whooping cough by the 6-in-1 vaccine.

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.

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

Yes, you need to have the whooping cough vaccine in every pregnancy to boost the antibody you pass on to your baby.

What are the side effects of the whooping cough vaccine?

After having 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. This is normal after having a vaccine and it should only last a few days.

Other side effects can include a high temperature, irritation at the injection site, nausea and loss of appetite, tiredness and headache. Serious side effects are extremely rare.