

# Whooping cough and pregnancy

Your questions answered on  
how to help protect your baby

2014 edition



**There is a lot of whooping cough around at the moment and babies who are too young to start their vaccinations are at greatest risk.**

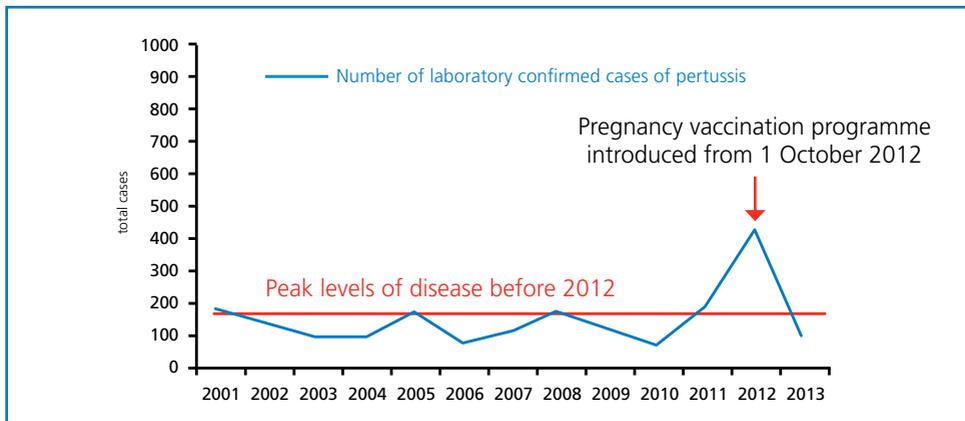
**Expectant mothers can help protect their babies by getting themselves vaccinated against whooping cough from week 28 of their pregnancy.**

**The vaccination programme introduced in 2012 is already showing very promising results in babies but because the disease continues to circulate at high levels in older age groups, pregnant mothers still need to be vaccinated.**

You may have thought whooping cough had died out but the number of cases in England and

Wales started to increase from late 2011. In 2012 there were ten times as many cases as would be expected in a peak year of disease. Of particular concern was the rising number of cases in young babies who are at highest risk of severe complications.

To protect their babies from this serious disease all pregnant women are being offered the whooping cough vaccine. This programme has been in place since 1 October 2012 and has already been effective at protecting babies until they can have their first vaccine at two months of age, as the graph shows. However, whooping cough levels are still high in older age groups, so it's important that babies continue to be protected.



Laboratory confirmed cases of pertussis in infants under three months of age in England and Wales

■ Whooping cough is a serious disease that can lead to pneumonia and permanent brain damage. Most babies with whooping cough will be admitted to hospital and they are at risk of dying from the disease. Deaths from whooping cough are rare in the UK but more babies died in 2012 than in previous recent years.

■ Young babies are particularly at risk of serious disease and they remain vulnerable until they can be vaccinated against whooping cough from two months of age. You can help protect your unborn baby against whooping cough in its first weeks by having the whooping cough vaccination while you are pregnant. You should have the vaccination even if you've been vaccinated before or have had whooping cough yourself.

■ The best time to get vaccinated to protect your baby is from week 28 to week 32 of your pregnancy – but you can have the vaccine up to 38 weeks if you miss the recommended time.

■ Uptake of the vaccine amongst pregnant women has been very encouraging and the vaccination programme has been effective in protecting young babies against whooping cough as the graph shows.

■ Talk to your midwife or GP and make an appointment to get vaccinated.

■ Your baby will still need to be vaccinated as normal when he or she reaches two months of age.

**Don't take the risk**

Act now to protect your baby from whooping cough from birth

## What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (also known as pertussis) causes long bursts of coughing and choking, making it hard to breathe. The 'whoop' noise is caused by gasping for breath after each burst of coughing. Young babies don't always do this which can make it difficult to recognise the disease. Whooping cough commonly lasts for two to three months. Babies under one year of age 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.

## Why are we seeing more outbreaks?

On average, in the last ten years (2002-2011) in England and Wales, 800 cases of whooping cough were reported every year with over 300 babies having to go to hospital and four babies dying. During 2012, however, cases of whooping cough rose sharply with nearly 10,000 cases and 14 baby deaths.

The causes of this increase are not yet fully understood but are

being investigated. Of greatest importance is the protection of young babies who are the most likely to suffer badly if they catch the disease. We can protect these babies by vaccinating women once they reach week 28 of their pregnancy. This will help protect the baby from birth until its first routine vaccine is due at two months of age.

## Are we the only country to have this problem?

A number of countries are experiencing a similar problem including the USA which has seen rising numbers of cases and deaths in young children. The USA and New Zealand also recommend that women are vaccinated whilst they are pregnant.

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

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in the UK has completed a large study of the safety of the vaccine in pregnancy. This study, including more than 18,000 vaccinated women, found no risks to pregnancy associated

with the vaccine and rates of normal, healthy births were as seen in unvaccinated women. Similar vaccines are also routinely recommended during pregnancy in the US where no risks to pregnancy have been found. The whooping cough vaccine is not a live vaccine so it can't cause whooping cough in those who have the vaccine or in their babies. It's safer for you to have the vaccine than to risk your newborn baby catching whooping cough.

## Are there any side effects from having the vaccine whilst pregnant?

You may have some mild side effects from the vaccine that are common, such as swelling, redness or tenderness where the vaccine is given. Serious side effects are extremely rare, especially in adults. There are no safety concerns specific to having the vaccine during pregnancy.

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

The immunity you acquire 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 its life until he or she is old enough to have the vaccine at two months

# The vaccination programme is already showing promising results but pregnant mothers still need to get vaccinated

of age. Babies are offered whooping cough vaccination at 2, 3 and 4 months of age as part of their routine immunisations.

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

No vaccination guarantees 100% protection but this programme has been in place since October 2012 in the UK and it has shown that having the vaccination is very effective in protecting your baby from whooping cough until his or her vaccinations start at two months of age.

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

Unfortunately, no, there is no effective alternative. In recent years, most of the whooping

Getting vaccinated from week 28 of your pregnancy will help protect your baby

cough deaths in the UK have been in young babies before they were old enough to have their first whooping cough vaccination. Any protection you may have had through either having had whooping cough or being vaccinated when you were young may have worn off. Having the vaccine during pregnancy provides antibodies that will be passed to your baby so he or she has some protection in the first few weeks of life when whooping cough is most serious.

### **Why can't my baby be vaccinated as soon as it's born?**

Even if immunised immediately, your baby would not be protected from birth as it takes up to two weeks to develop a response to the vaccine and babies need three doses to build up full protection.

### **How long will my vaccination protect my baby from whooping cough?**

The immunity your newborn baby gets from your vaccination will help protect it through the very early weeks of life until it can have its first routine vaccination at two months of age. Your baby will still need the full course of three routine whooping cough vaccinations to protect them until

## **Your baby will still need their routine vaccinations from two months of age**

they have their pre-school booster dose three years later.

### **I had the vaccination as a child and I am going to breast feed. Won't that protect my baby?**

Unfortunately, breast feeding won't provide enough protection for your baby against whooping cough.

### **I'm expecting twins – what should I do?**

One vaccination will help protect all your babies, no matter how many you are expecting.

### **What if I get pregnant again soon after the birth of my baby?**

You should get re-vaccinated from week 28 of any pregnancy.

### **When will I get the vaccination?**

If you are pregnant, you should have your vaccination at a routine antenatal visit from 28 to 38 weeks but ideally between

weeks 28 and 32. If you are already 28 weeks pregnant or over you can have your vaccination at your next routine visit or make an appointment with your GP if you wish to have it sooner.

As there is no whooping cough-only vaccine, the vaccine you will be offered also protects against polio, diphtheria and tetanus. It is the same vaccine that is routinely given to children before they start school.

### **How late in my pregnancy can I have the vaccination?**

The vaccination should be given any time after 28 weeks right up to 38 weeks of pregnancy.

### **What should I do now?**

If you are in week 28 of your pregnancy or beyond and you haven't heard from your midwife or GP, contact them to arrange an appointment at the earliest

opportunity. If you are in the earlier stages of pregnancy wait until you hear from them.

### **I have heard that I should have the flu vaccine when I am pregnant. Can I have both vaccines? Should I have them together?**

If you are pregnant during the flu vaccine season, then you should have the flu vaccine as early as possible in your pregnancy. If you are 28 weeks and over, 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.

### **Where can I get more information?**

[www.nhs.uk/vaccinations](http://www.nhs.uk/vaccinations)

**Whooping cough is a serious disease that can lead to permanent brain damage in young infants**

## Whooping cough and pregnancy

### What you need to know

- Whooping cough is a serious disease in babies in whom it can lead to complications resulting in hospitalisation and even death
- Expectant mothers can protect their babies from birth by having the whooping cough vaccination whilst pregnant
- The best time to get vaccinated is between weeks 28 and 32 of the pregnancy
- The number of babies infected with whooping cough has fallen since vaccination in pregnancy was introduced
- But pregnant mothers still need to get vaccinated because the disease remains at high levels in older children and adults
- In a recent UK study, over 20 000 women were vaccinated and no risks to their pregnancies were found

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