



UK Health  
Security  
Agency



# Whooping cough and pregnancy

Help protect your baby  
with the whooping  
cough vaccine



 **mmunisation**

the safest way to protect yourself and your baby

**Whooping cough vaccination during every pregnancy boosts your antibodies which are then passed to your baby to help protect them from the day they are born.**



# Act now to protect your baby against whooping cough from birth

## Don't take the risk

- whooping cough (pertussis) can be serious for babies and may lead to complications resulting in hospitalisation and even death
- you can help protect your baby against whooping cough in their first weeks by having the whooping cough vaccine while you are pregnant
- you will normally have your whooping cough vaccine around the time of your mid-pregnancy scan (usually 20 weeks) but you can receive it from 16 weeks
- vaccination in pregnancy provides very high levels of protection against serious whooping cough disease to your baby until they can have their first vaccine at 8 weeks of age
- you need to have the whooping cough vaccine in every pregnancy to boost the antibody you pass on to your baby. You should have the vaccine in each pregnancy even if you've been vaccinated before or have had whooping cough
- studies from the UK and other countries have shown the whooping cough vaccine in pregnancy is very safe for you and your baby
- if you have reached 20 weeks of pregnancy and have not yet been offered the whooping cough vaccine, talk to your midwife or GP practice and make an appointment to get vaccinated
- to stay protected your baby will still need to have their routine vaccines which start at 8 weeks of age

## Getting vaccinated mid-pregnancy after your scan (usually 20 weeks) will help protect your baby

### What is whooping cough?

Whooping cough (also known as pertussis) is an infection that 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 often lasts for 2 to 4 months. Babies under 1 year of age are most at risk from whooping cough. For these babies, the disease can be very serious and may lead to pneumonia and permanent brain damage. In the worst cases, it can cause death.

### How common is whooping cough?

Whooping cough peaks every 3 to 5 years in the UK. Cases increased in all age groups across the country from late 2023 continuing into 2024.

### Do other countries offer whooping cough vaccine in pregnancy?

Yes, whooping cough vaccines are used around the world including Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, Spain, the UK and the USA. All these countries recommend the whooping cough vaccine for pregnant women.

### When will I get the vaccine?

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.

### How late in my pregnancy can I have the vaccine?

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. It may be less effective if you have the vaccine close to when your baby is born.



## **I have just given birth, is it too late to have my vaccine?**

You can even have whooping cough vaccine after you give birth. You can have it up to 8 weeks after your baby is born, until they are old enough to get their first vaccines. This can help protect you from whooping cough infection, so reducing the chance of you giving the infection to your baby.

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

If you have reached 20 weeks of pregnancy and have not yet been offered the whooping cough vaccine, please ask your midwife or GP practice to arrange an appointment as soon as possible.

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

The vaccine you will be offered, called ADACEL, also protects against diphtheria and tetanus. All the parts of the vaccine are not live (inactivated) and can be safely given in pregnancy.

You can read the ADACEL leaflet here: [www.medicines.org.uk/emc/product/15553/pil](http://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/product/15553/pil)  
[#about-medicine](#)

## **Is it safe, for me and my baby, to be vaccinated while I'm pregnant?**

Yes, this vaccine is safe to have during pregnancy. Studies in the UK and from around the world have shown the whooping cough vaccine is very safe for you and your baby. Many countries in Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand also recommend whooping cough vaccine in pregnancy. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in the UK completed a large study of the safety of the vaccine in pregnancy in 2014. This study, including nearly 18,000 vaccinated women, found no risks to pregnancy associated with the vaccine, and rates of normal healthy births were the same in vaccinated and unvaccinated women.

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

**The vaccine is highly effective at protecting babies against whooping cough from birth and women need to be vaccinated in every pregnancy**

## 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. There are no safety concerns specific to having the vaccine during pregnancy. Any suspected side effects can be reported to the MHRA yellow card scheme. (see the back of this leaflet for details)

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

The antibodies (protection) you develop from having the vaccine will be passed to your baby through the placenta. This will help protect your baby in their first vulnerable weeks of their life until they are old enough to have their own vaccine at 8 weeks of age.

## When will my baby get their own whooping cough vaccines?

Babies are routinely offered whooping cough vaccines at 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age.

You can read all about infant vaccinations at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-guide-to-immunisations-for-babies-up-to-13-months-of-age](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-guide-to-immunisations-for-babies-up-to-13-months-of-age)

**To stay protected your baby will still need their routine vaccinations at 8 weeks of age and according to the infant vaccine schedule that offers the best protection**

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

No vaccination is 100% effective at preventing disease and studies in the UK since the beginning of the programme have shown that the vaccine is around 90% effective at protecting your baby from whooping cough, until they can have their first whooping cough vaccine. If they do catch whooping cough it should be less severe.

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

Unfortunately, there is no other effective way to protect your baby. In recent years, most of the whooping cough deaths in the UK have been in very young babies before they were old enough to have their first whooping cough vaccine.

## **Do I really need to have a whooping cough vaccine every time I am pregnant?**

Any protection you may have had from having whooping cough or a previous vaccine is unlikely to provide good protection to your baby. Having the vaccine during every pregnancy means you will boost your antibody levels. These will then be passed to your baby so they should have good protection in their first few weeks of life, when whooping cough is most serious.

## **Why can't my baby have the vaccine once they are born?**

Your baby can only have their first whooping cough vaccine when they reach 8 weeks of age. They are not given their whooping cough vaccines earlier as they may not respond as well. Babies need 3 doses of the vaccine to build up full protection.

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

Breastfeeding cannot provide enough protection for your baby against whooping cough even if you had a vaccine or whooping cough disease in the past.

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

Having your whooping cough vaccine on time will help protect your baby from birth through their first weeks of life. Your baby will still need the full course of 3 routine whooping cough vaccines from 8 weeks of age to protect them until they have their pre-school booster dose 3 years later.

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

You should have the vaccine in every pregnancy at the recommended time.

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

If you are pregnant during the flu season, then you should have the flu vaccine as early as possible in your pregnancy. If you are 16 weeks and over, then you can and should have both vaccines. The whooping cough vaccine can be given at the same time as the flu vaccine but do not wait until the winter season to have them together.

# Vaccines offered in pregnancy help protect mum and baby. Make sure you have your vaccines at the right time.

Where can I get more information?

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



You can report suspected side effects on the Yellow Card website or by calling the free phone line 0800 731 6789 (9am to 5pm Monday to Friday) or by downloading the Yellow Card app.

[www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard](http://www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard)



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