

Whooping cough vaccine & your pregnancy

Whooping cough vaccine and pregnant women

Whooping cough vaccine given to the mother when she is pregnant is the best way to stop babies from getting whooping cough, before they are old enough to get their own vaccine at six weeks.

All pregnant women should have the vaccine to prevent whooping cough, from five to two months before the baby is due, in each pregnancy.

Whooping cough

Whooping cough (also called pertussis) is an illness that causes a long lasting cough. Whooping cough can be much more serious for babies than adults. In rare cases babies have died from whooping cough. Older children and adults can get whooping cough and can spread it to babies.

Whooping cough starts like a cold with a blocked or runny nose, sneezing, a mild fever and an occasional cough. Over time the cough gets worse and severe coughing fits can occur. Coughing can be followed by vomiting, choking or taking in big breaths causing a 'whooping sound'. The cough can last for many weeks and can be worse at night.

Why is whooping cough so serious?

For adults and older children whooping cough can just be a cough. The cough can last a long time (5 to 7 weeks). When babies get whooping cough, they can get very sick, and even die.

Newborn babies may not cough at all, but can stop breathing and turn blue. Other babies have trouble feeding or they can choke and gag.

Why should women get the vaccine during pregnancy?

Recent research shows that whooping cough vaccine given to the mother, from five to two months before the baby is due to be born, prevents whooping cough in babies. The whooping cough vaccine is safe for both mother and baby.

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How does the vaccine work?

Whooping cough vaccine given to women during pregnancy seems to protect newborn babies in two ways.

1. The mother responds to the vaccine by making antibodies against whooping cough, which are passed to the baby in late pregnancy. These antibodies from the mother help protect the baby for some weeks after birth until the baby has the vaccine themselves.
2. Mothers who have the vaccine are much less likely to get whooping cough themselves, and pass on the illness to babies.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes. Research in over forty thousand women has found no increased risk for mother or baby.

Women should have the whooping cough vaccine in each pregnancy

Immunity against whooping cough (whether through vaccination or natural infection) fades over time. After the mother gets the vaccine during pregnancy there is an immune response, and her body makes antibodies. These antibodies are passed to the baby before birth. The antibodies protect the infant while it is most at risk. This helps keep baby safe until it is able to get its own vaccine.

To get the best protection for babies, the mother needs to have the vaccine during each pregnancy at 20 – 32 weeks. The 28 week visit is an ideal time to get the whooping cough vaccine.

Is it safe to breastfeed after getting the whooping cough vaccine?

Yes. Breastfeeding after getting the whooping cough vaccine during pregnancy is not only safe but will also pass more protection against whooping cough to the baby. By getting the vaccine at 28 weeks of pregnancy, there will be time for your body to produce antibodies which will be present in breast milk as soon as it comes in.

Do babies still need their own whooping cough vaccine?

Yes. The protection against whooping cough that is passed on to babies by their mother having the vaccine only lasts a short time. The baby still needs to have its own vaccine. This should be given at six weeks of age, followed by two further doses at 4 and 6 months of age. All children should also have booster doses of whooping cough vaccine at 18 months and 4 years of age.

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Where can I get more information?

Talk to your midwife, family doctor or obstetrician about the whooping cough vaccine.

To talk with a MotherSafe Counsellor, call MotherSafe: NSW Medications in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding Service:

Please phone: 9382 6539 (Sydney metropolitan area) or
 1800 647 848 (Other areas of NSW)

Our staff are available Monday – Friday 9am-5pm (excluding public holidays).

If you need an interpreter, please call the telephone Translating and Interpreter Service (TIS) on 131 450.