

# Whooping cough and pregnancy

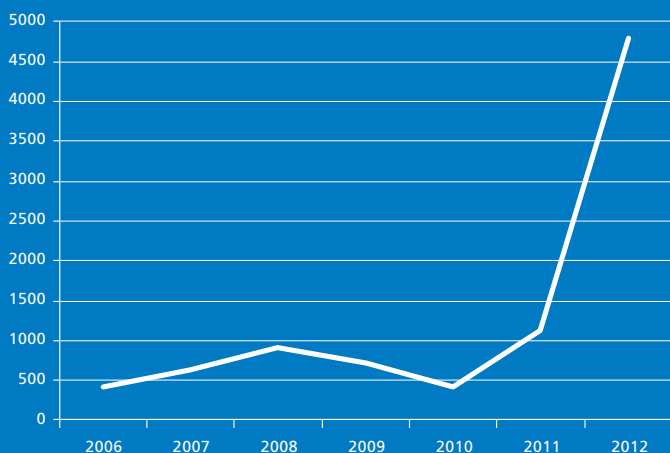
Your questions answered on  
how to help protect your baby



**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.**

You may have thought whooping cough had died out but it has been rising recently with over four times as many cases in England and Wales up to the end of August 2012 as there were up to the end of August 2011. Cases in young babies especially are rising quickly.



**Confirmed whooping cough cases from 2006 to 2012\***

\*In England and Wales, annual cases in 2012 calculated from cases reported to end of August 2012

- Whooping cough is a serious disease that can lead to pneumonia and permanent brain damage. Many 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 have already died this year than in 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 from getting whooping cough in its first weeks after birth 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 38 of your pregnancy – ideally between 28 and 32 weeks.
- 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 have been rising very sharply with over 4700 cases and more than twice as many 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?

The USA has seen exactly the same problem with rising numbers of cases and deaths in young children. It also recommends 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?

Having vaccinations during pregnancy has been studied in the USA and no evidence of risk has been found. And while the vaccine used in America is slightly different from the one used in the UK, there is no reason to believe that the

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

safety of the vaccine used here will be any different. 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 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 having the vaccination is likely to be the most effective way to help protect your baby from whooping cough until his or her vaccinations start at two months of age.

## **Babies are dying from whooping cough**

### **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 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?**

Newborn babies' immune systems don't make good responses to the vaccine and they need three doses to build up full protection.

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

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

### **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.

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

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

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

[www.immunisation.dh.gov.uk](http://www.immunisation.dh.gov.uk)

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