

Protecting your baby against rotavirus

Answers to your questions on
the vaccine that protects babies
against rotavirus infection



From 1 July 2013,
the routine childhood
immunisation schedule will
include a vaccine to protect
babies against rotavirus
infection – a common
cause of diarrhoea and
sickness that can become
very serious.

**This leaflet describes what
rotavirus is, which babies are
eligible for the vaccination,
and explains when and
how your baby will receive
the vaccine.**

What is rotavirus?

Most babies are sick (vomit) or have diarrhoea at some time, and parents deal with this routinely. Many of these illnesses are caused by a virus called rotavirus. Most babies recover at home but, in a small number of cases, rotavirus infection can become serious, with babies getting dehydrated (losing body fluids) and possibly needing hospital treatment.

In England, almost all babies will get rotavirus at some time within the first five years of life and about one in every five will need medical attention. About one in ten of these (roughly 13,000) will be admitted to hospital because of rotavirus.

How is rotavirus spread?

Rotavirus can spread very easily and, once infected, babies can pass it on to others. The virus can be spread through hand to mouth contact and be picked up from contaminated surfaces such as toys, hands or dirty nappies. It can also be spread through the air by sneezing and coughing. Washing hands and keeping surfaces clean can help reduce the spread of the virus but can never completely stop it.

However, evidence shows that the most effective way to prevent babies catching rotavirus is to give them the rotavirus vaccination. That is why rotavirus vaccination has been introduced as part of the routine childhood immunisation schedule.

Rotavirus can spread very easily and once infected babies can pass it onto others.

Rotavirus vaccine is given as a liquid from a dropper to make it easy for your baby to swallow.

Is my baby eligible for the vaccination?

If your baby was born on or after 1 May 2013 he or she will be offered the vaccine from 1 July.

The vaccine will be given with your baby's other routine vaccinations at two months of age and again at three months. This is because your baby needs two rotavirus vaccinations at least four weeks apart to get the best protection.

If your baby misses one of the vaccinations, it can also be given at two and four months of age, or at three and four months. The first dose of the vaccination will not be given to babies over 15 weeks of age and no vaccine will be given to babies over 24 weeks of age. They can have the second dose if they had their first dose before 15 weeks.

Why can't older babies have the vaccine?

As they get older, some babies – about one in a thousand – get a condition that causes a blockage in their lower gut. It is extremely rare before three months of age and most cases occur between five months and a year. However, there is a very small chance (around two in every hundred thousand babies vaccinated) that the first dose of the vaccine might also cause this blockage to develop. To reduce the risk of this happening, the first dose of the vaccine will not be given to babies older than 15 weeks of age.

The vaccine should not be given to infants older than 24 weeks of age. Many unvaccinated babies over 24 weeks will already have had rotavirus infection and so should have built up some immunity to it, and future infections will be less severe. And, if younger babies are having the vaccination the chances of rotavirus spreading will be reduced.



Many cases of sickness and diarrhoea are caused by a virus called rotavirus

Most babies recover at home but rotavirus infection can be serious and some babies can become dehydrated and may need hospital treatment

How is the vaccine given?

Rotavirus vaccine is given as a liquid from a dropper to make it easy for your baby to swallow.

What if my baby vomits immediately after having the vaccine?

The drops will be given again.

Will my baby get the rotavirus disease from having the vaccine?

No, the viruses in the vaccine are weakened so they don't cause the disease. The vaccine helps your baby build up immunity, so the next time he or she comes into contact with the virus they will not get the disease.

Because the vaccine is given by mouth, it's possible that the virus in the vaccine will pass through your baby's gut and be picked up by whoever changes his or her nappy. Therefore, people whose immune systems are weakened because of a medical condition or treatment should avoid close contact for at least 14 days with babies who have had the rotavirus vaccine. All those in close contact with recently vaccinated infants should observe good personal hygiene (e.g. washing their hands after changing a child's nappy).

Does the vaccine have any side effects?

Many millions of doses of the vaccine have been used and it has a good safety record. Babies who have had the vaccine can sometimes become restless and tetchy, and some may even develop mild diarrhoea. If you're at all concerned about your baby's health a day or so after any vaccination you should speak to your doctor or health visitor.

In very rare cases (about two in every hundred thousand babies vaccinated), the vaccine can affect the baby's lower gut and they may develop abdominal pain, vomiting, and sometimes they may pass what looks like red currant jelly in their nappies. If this happens, you should contact your doctor immediately.

What if my baby is ill on the day the vaccination is due?

There is no reason to postpone the appointment unless your baby is vomiting, has diarrhoea, is seriously ill or has a fever. If your baby is well enough to have the other routine vaccines, he or she can have the rotavirus vaccine.

Are there any babies who shouldn't have the vaccination?

The vaccination should not be given to babies who:

- are over 24 weeks of age
- are over 15 weeks of age (unless they are having their second dose having had their first dose before 15 weeks and are still under 24 weeks of age)
- have reacted very badly to a previous dose of the vaccine, or to any of the substances that go into the vaccine
- have certain long-term conditions in which case speak to your GP first
- have a fever, diarrhoea or are vomiting on the day of the appointment, in which cases the visit should be rearranged.

My baby was premature. When should they have the vaccine?

As with all vaccinations, the immunisation schedule should be followed from the actual date of birth, not from the date when the baby was due.

Is it OK to breast-feed my baby after they have the vaccination?

Yes. There are no problems associated with breast-feeding babies who have recently had the rotavirus vaccine.

Will the vaccine stop babies getting any sickness and diarrhoea?

No. Rotavirus isn't the only cause of sickness and diarrhoea in babies, so some may still get unwell. However, the vaccine will stop about eight out of ten babies getting vomiting and diarrhoea caused by rotavirus. And the more babies that have the vaccine, the more difficult it will be for the virus to spread.

The vaccine will be given with your baby's other routine vaccinations at two months of age and again at three months

Where can I find more information?

To find out more, talk to your GP, health visitor or practice nurse at any time or pick up a more detailed Q&A factsheet from your GP surgery. You can also go to the NHS Choices website at www.nhs.uk/rotavirus



Rotavirus vaccination in a nutshell

- Infection with rotavirus causes sickness and diarrhoea in young babies
- It can lead to hospitalisation
- The vaccine is given as drops in the mouth at two and three months of age
- It will help prevent eight out of ten cases of rotavirus infection
- Babies over 24 months of age will not be given the vaccine

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