A guide to immunisation for babies up to 15 months of age

Includes information on a new vaccine for babies aged 2, 3 and 4 months
‘The two public health interventions that have had the greatest impact on the world’s health are clean water and vaccines.’

World Health Organization
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Introduction

This guide is for parents with babies up to the age of 15 months. It provides information on all the routine immunisations given to babies and young children to protect them from serious childhood diseases. It also describes these diseases and explains why children need protection against them.

In particular, it describes a new vaccine, called DTaP/IPV/Hib, introduced in 2004 to protect your baby against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), polio and Hib.

This new vaccine is given to babies when they are two, three and four months old, but unlike the previous vaccine, the polio part is given in the same injection rather than by mouth.

If you have any questions about immunisation, speak to your doctor, practice nurse or health visitor.

Why is the vaccine being changed now?

As polio has mostly been wiped out through a worldwide vaccination programme, the risk of polio infection being brought into the UK is very low. This means that a switch can be made from the ‘live’ oral polio vaccine (OPV, given by mouth) that provides better community-wide protection, to ‘inactivated’ polio vaccine (IPV), which provides effective individual protection.

A whooping cough vaccine that contains only parts of cells (an ‘acellular’ pertussis vaccine) is now available. It has been shown to be just as effective as the whole-cell pertussis vaccine used before.
What are the benefits of the new vaccine?

- As the polio vaccine is inactivated (that is, it is not live), it does not carry the slight risk of causing vaccine-associated paralytic polio (that is, when the vaccine itself causes paralysis) that the previous live oral vaccine carried.
- The acellular pertussis vaccine now available is as effective as the whole-cell pertussis vaccine used previously.
- The new vaccine is likely to cause fewer minor reactions such as swelling or redness where the injection is given, particularly in older children.
- It does not contain thiomersal (see page 10).

My baby daughter has just been immunised with the old vaccine. Will she be fully protected or come to any harm?

The old and new vaccines are compatible. She will be fully protected as long as she completes the programme of immunisations (see back cover).

There is more detailed information in the DTap/IPV/Hib factsheet which you can get from the website below or from your doctor's surgery, practice nurse or health visitor.

You can also visit www.immunisation.nhs.uk or call NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.
Immunisation – the facts

What is immunisation?
Immunisation is a way of protecting against serious diseases. Once we have been immunised, our bodies are more able to fight those diseases if we come into contact with them.

Why do we need immunisation?
Our bodies have a natural defence system against disease. This is called the immune system. The immune system produces substances called antibodies which usually fight off infection and prevent disease. However, there are some diseases that can kill children or cause lasting damage to their health. Immunisations are given to strengthen your child's immune system to fight off those diseases if they come into contact with them.

Immunisation is the safest and most effective way of protecting your baby against serious diseases.

When should my baby be immunised?
Your baby should have their first immunisations at two months old. They will be given further doses of these immunisations when they are three months old and four months old. Other immunisations are given at around 13 months old, then between three and five years of age (before your child starts school), and in their teenage years (see the table on the back of this leaflet).

How will I know when my baby’s immunisations are due?
Your doctor's surgery or clinic will send you an appointment for you to bring your baby for immunisation. Most surgeries and health centres run special immunisation or baby clinics. If you can't get to the clinic, contact the surgery to make another appointment. All childhood immunisations are free. It is important that your baby has their immunisations at the right age. This will help keep the risk of your baby catching these diseases as low as possible. Also, the ages when vaccines are given have been chosen to keep any risk of reactions as low as possible.

What happens at the appointment?
The doctor or nurse will explain the immunisation process to you, and answer any questions you have. The vaccine will be given by injection into your baby’s thigh or upper arm.
Common questions about immunisation

How does immunisation work?
Vaccines contain a small part of the bacterium or virus that causes a disease, or tiny amounts of the chemicals that the bacterium produces. Vaccines work by causing the body’s immune system to make antibodies (substances that fight off infection and disease). If your child comes into contact with the infection, the antibodies will recognise it and be ready to protect him or her.

Because vaccines have been used so successfully in the UK, diseases such as polio and diphtheria have effectively disappeared from this country.

If these diseases have effectively disappeared in this country, why do we need to immunise against them?
Around the world, more than 14 million people a year die from infectious diseases. More than half of these are children under the age of five. Most of these deaths could be prevented by immunisation.

In the UK, these diseases are kept at bay by the high immunisation rates.

As more people travel abroad, there is a risk that they will bring these diseases back into the UK. The diseases may spread to people who haven’t been immunised and so your baby is at greater risk if he or she has not been immunised.

Immunisation doesn’t just protect your child; it also helps to protect your family and the whole community, especially those children who, for medical reasons, can’t be immunised.

Remember, it’s never too late to have your child immunised.

Even if your child has missed an immunisation and is older than the recommended ages, talk to your doctor, practice nurse or health visitor to arrange for them to be immunised.