‘The two public health interventions that have had the greatest impact on the world’s health are clean water and vaccines.’

World Health Organization

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

How do vaccines 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 diphtheria have almost disappeared from this country.

There are some diseases that can kill children or cause lasting damage to their health. Immunisations are given to prepare your child’s immune system to fight off those diseases if they come into contact with them.

When should my baby be immunised?
It is important that your baby has their immunisations at the right age – the first ones are given 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 12 months of age. Other immunisations are given later, see the table on the back cover of this leaflet.

Why are babies vaccinated so early?
Many of these diseases can be particularly serious in young babies. It is important to make sure babies are protected as early as possible to prevent them catching the diseases.

Why does my baby need more than one dose of vaccine?
Most immunisations have to be given more than once to prepare your child’s immunity. For example, three doses of DTaP/IPV/Hib vaccine are needed to provide protection in babies. Booster doses are then given later in life to provide longer-term protection.

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 their 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.

What happens at the appointment?
The doctor or nurse will explain the immunisation process to you, and answer any questions you have. Most vaccines are injected into the muscle of the child’s thigh or the upper arm. Rotavirus vaccine is given as drops by mouth.

What if I missed the appointment?
If you missed the appointment or delayed the immunisation, make a new appointment. You can pick up the immunisation schedule where it stopped without having to start again. Rotavirus vaccine can only be started in babies up to 15 weeks of age and no dose of the vaccine can be given over 24 weeks of age.

Other Headings
The childhood immunisation programme
Other immunisations
Travel advice for children