Introduction

This guide is for parents with children up to the age of 15 months. It explains all about the immunisations that are given to babies and young children to protect them from serious childhood diseases. Inside, you will find information about the major diseases and why children need protection against them.

If you have more questions or you want more detailed information, speak to your doctor, practice nurse or health visitor. You can also visit www.immunisation.nhs.uk or call NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.

‘The two public health interventions that have had the greatest impact on the world’s health are clean water and vaccines.’
World Health Organization
Immunisation – the facts

What is immunisation?
Immunisation is a way of protecting ourselves from serious disease. 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 fight off disease and infection.

There are some diseases that can kill children or cause lasting damage to their health, and sometimes your child’s immune system needs help to fight those diseases. Immunisation provides that help.

Immunisation is the safest and most effective way of protecting your child against serious diseases.
**When to have your child immunised**

Your child 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 old (before your child starts school), and in their teenage years.

Some immunisations have to be given more than once to build up your child's immunity (protection). This top-up dose is sometimes called a booster.

You will be sent an appointment inviting you to bring your child for their immunisations.

Most doctors' surgeries and health centres run special immunisation or baby clinics. You can often drop in at other times if you can't get to the clinic during the day.

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**How does immunisation work?**

Your child will be given a vaccine. A vaccine contains a small part of the bacteria or virus that causes a disease, or tiny amounts of the chemicals that the bacteria produce. Vaccines are specially treated so they do not cause the disease itself. Instead, they work by encouraging the body's immune system to make antibodies. If your child ever comes into contact with the disease, the antibodies will recognise it and be ready to protect your child.

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

**If these diseases have almost disappeared, why do we need to immunise against them?**

The diseases are still around in many parts of the world where immunisation is not so widely available, and there are still a few cases in this country. As more people travel abroad, there is a risk that they will bring these diseases back into the UK, and that the diseases will spread to people who haven't been immunised against them. Your child is at risk if they have not been immunised.

Immunisation doesn't just protect your child – it can help to protect your family and the whole community, especially those children who can't be immunised.

It is never too late to have your child immunised. Even if your child is older than the recommended ages, talk to your doctor, practice nurse or health visitor to arrange for them to be protected.
How do we know that the vaccines are safe?
Before anyone can be given a vaccine, it has to go through many tests to check that it is safe and that it works. These checks continue even after a vaccine has been introduced. Only vaccines that pass all of the safety tests are used. All medicines can cause side effects, but vaccines are among the very safest. Research from around the world shows that immunisation is the safest way to protect your child's health.

I am a bit worried that my child will be upset by having an injection.
Your child may cry and be upset for a few minutes, but they will usually settle down after a cuddle. Many children don't get upset at all. If you don't want to be in the room when your child has the injection, tell the nurse or doctor beforehand. Some parents like to take a friend or partner to hold their child during the injection.

How will my child feel afterwards?
All children are different. Most will not have any side effects. Some children will:
- get redness or swelling where they had the injection, which will slowly disappear on its own; or
- feel a bit irritable and unwell and develop a temperature (fever).

Your practice nurse, GP or health visitor may suggest you give your child a dose of paracetamol or ibuprofen liquid if they get a fever.

Are there any reasons why my child should not be immunised?
There are very few reasons why a child should not be immunised. But when you take your child for their immunisation, you should let your health visitor, doctor or practice nurse know if your child:
- has a high fever;
- has had a bad reaction to any other immunisation;
- has had treatment for cancer or other serious conditions;
- has a severe (anaphylactic) allergy to eggs;
- has a bleeding disorder;
- has had convulsions (fits).

You should also let them know if your child or any other close family member:
- has any illness which affects the immune system, for example, HIV or AIDS;
- is taking any medicine which affects the immune system - for example, immunosuppressants (given after organ transplant or for cancer) or high-dose steroids.

Does my child have to be immunised?
In the UK, parents can decide whether to have their children immunised. Around the world, children are now routinely protected with vaccines. Because of this, some of the world's most serious diseases may soon disappear.

The childhood immunisation programme in the UK offers your child protection against many of these diseases.

Are there other ways to immunise my child?
There is no other proven, effective way to immunise your child. Homeopathic medicine has been tried as another way to protect against whooping cough, but it didn't work. The Council of the Faculty of Homeopathy (the registered organisation for doctors qualified in homeopathy) advises parents to have their children immunised with standard vaccines.