



UK Health  
Security  
Agency

# Maternal vaccination programme

## Briefing pack for UKHSA stakeholders



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## Introduction

This briefing pack provides information on the maternal vaccination programme.

At the time of writing, pregnant women are offered the whooping cough vaccine. Whooping cough is known clinically as 'pertussis' but will be referred to as whooping cough in this toolkit as the NHS uses this name in its public-facing communications.

This toolkit will be updated with material on seasonal vaccines, such as the flu and COVID-19 vaccines, for future versions.

This toolkit aims to support stakeholders to explain and promote the maternal vaccination programme to pregnant women. It contains background information, statistics, key messages, suggested social media copy, social media assets and links to useful information.

For further information about our national communications please contact:

[externalaffairs@ukhsa.gov.uk](mailto:externalaffairs@ukhsa.gov.uk)

Sign up to [our Stakeholder Cascade](#) to receive a weekly newsletter with the latest news, updates and guidance from UKHSA

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## NHS vaccination schedule for pregnant women

The NHS offers pregnant women vaccinations that help protect them and their babies during and after pregnancy.

Vaccines help the body's natural defence system (the immune system) to develop protective antibodies.

Antibodies fight disease and produce longer term protection against a particular disease. So, if someone is vaccinated against a particular disease and they come into contact with it at a later date, their immune system will respond to that infection more quickly.

Vaccination can help prevent disease or make the illness less serious. Antibodies developed while pregnant pass to the unborn baby and help to protect them in their first few months of life.

When it is offered	Vaccine
Usually from 20-32 weeks, ideally after the 20-week scan.  It may be given from week 16 up to the time a woman gives birth.	Whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine
During flu season at any point in pregnancy	Flu vaccine
During COVID-19 season at any point in pregnancy	COVID-19 vaccine

You can read more on the [vaccinations in pregnancy page](#) on the NHS website.

## How stakeholders can help increase maternal vaccine uptake

There are a variety of ways that you might be able to help us communicate the importance of pregnant women taking up vaccines offered to them:

- **Share information about the vaccine offer with your networks** – we have a wide variety of resources available including leaflets and posters (many available in accessible and translated materials), social media assets and suggested copy for cascade to your audiences.
- **Contact us if you would like to do something more bespoke** – if you are looking to do something special to promote the maternal vaccine programme (or any individual vaccines within the offer) on your social media channels or website and need some creative input or suggested text for a blog/article, please email us.
- **Get in touch about using our spokespeople** – if you are planning a webinar or briefing or your audiences and would like one of our senior colleagues to speak about the spring programme or campaign, please get in touch.

- **Help us find case studies** – We are looking for case studies of people who are willing to share their experiences to encourage others to take up the vaccine offer. These could be for use in the press or on social media.

To discuss any of the above or any other suggestions you may have, please email [externalaffairs@ukhsa.gov.uk](mailto:externalaffairs@ukhsa.gov.uk)

## Whooping cough

One of UKHSA's responsibilities is collecting numbers of cases of notifiable diseases (including whooping cough). We publish analyses of local and national trends on a regular basis. In the years since monitoring began, we have seen a huge decline in whooping cough cases from peak years exceeding 100,000 cases annually in the 1950s.

Whooping cough is a cyclical disease that regularly peaks every 3 to 5 years. We are, unfortunately, seeing increasing rates of whooping cough in the first quarter of 2024. We expect these increasing rates to last for several months.

We have prepared some key messages and other useful resources and information to raise awareness of whooping cough, its signs and symptoms and the vaccine offers.

## Key messages

- Whooping cough is a bacterial infection of the lungs and airways. It spreads very easily through coughing and sneezing and can sometimes cause serious health problems, especially in young babies.
- Whooping cough rates have risen sharply in recent months. Babies who are too young to start their vaccinations are at greatest risk.
- Young babies with whooping cough often become very unwell and most will be admitted to hospital. When whooping cough is particularly severe, they can die.
- Vaccination is the best defence against whooping cough. The whooping cough vaccine is given as part of the routine childhood vaccination schedule in the UK at 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age with a booster offered preschool. This programme provides good protection against severe disease but protection after vaccination and disease will wane over time.

- Pregnant women can help protect their babies by getting vaccinated. When you have the whooping cough vaccination in pregnancy, your body produces antibodies to protect against whooping cough. These antibodies pass to your baby through the placenta giving them high levels of protection until they're able to have their own whooping cough vaccination from 8 weeks old.
- The best time to get vaccinated to protect your baby is between 20 to 32 weeks of pregnancy. The vaccine is usually offered to women after their 20-week scan. Vaccines can be given from as early as 16 weeks and women remain eligible beyond 32 weeks until they give birth. Mums-to-be can contact their midwife or GP surgery if they have reached week 20 of their pregnancy and are unsure whether they have had the vaccine. You can still have the vaccine in late pregnancy but it may not be as effective because there is less time for protection from the mother to pass to their baby.
- Whooping cough vaccine has been used extensively in pregnant women in the UK since October 2012. Vaccination of pregnant women has been shown to be around 90% effective in preventing whooping cough cases and hospital admissions in young babies and over 90% effective at preventing infant deaths.

## Symptoms

The first symptoms of whooping cough are similar to a common cold, with a runny nose and a mild fever.

After about a week or two, the characteristic cough develops with uncontrolled bouts of intense coughing that can last for several minutes, sometimes causing vomiting.

Coughing is often worse overnight. Coughing fits can cause some people to make a distinctive "whooping" sound as they gasp for breath between coughs. However, young babies and some others who have the infection don't always make this noise which means that whooping cough can sometimes be difficult to recognise.

Babies under 3 months old who are not fully protected through immunisation are at the highest risk of developing severe complications including pauses in breathing (apnoea), dehydration, pneumonia, or seizures.

You can read more about the signs, symptoms and what to do if you suspect your child may have [whooping cough on the NHS website](#).

If you are worried your baby may have whooping cough, contact your doctor immediately.

# Data and statistics



UKHSA publishes data on the number of laboratory confirmed cases of pertussis in England.


[Pertussis epidemiology in England in 2024](#)

At the time of writing, this data is published on a monthly basis.

# Communications assets

UKHSA has produced a new set of social media assets promoting the benefits of the whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine.

Asset	Channels/ handling	Post copy	Alternative (alt) text
	<p>X, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn</p> <p>Handling: Use static graphics for all channels except X, GIF for X.</p>	<p>Option 1:</p> <p>If you're pregnant, it's important to take up the <a href="#">#Pertussis</a> vaccine when offered. It helps to protect your baby in their first few weeks of life, as <a href="#">#WhoopingCough</a> can be life-threatening &amp; require hospital treatment. More info: <a href="https://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/whooping-cough-vaccination/">https://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/whooping-cough-vaccination/</a></p>	<p>Asset 1: Image of pregnant woman holding her belly. Text reads: the pertussis vaccine, given to pregnant women, helps protect young babies against whooping cough from birth.</p>
		<p>Option 2: (only when cases are high)</p>	<p>Asset 2: Image of pregnant woman being vaccinated.</p>

		<p>Whooping cough (pertussis) cases are currently high, &amp; the disease can be life-threatening for newborn babies. If you're pregnant, it's important to take up the <a href="https://ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2024/04/12/what-is-whooping-cough-and-how-can-i-prevent-my-children-catching-it/">#Pertussis</a> vaccine when offered. It helps protect your baby in their first weeks of life <a href="https://ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2024/04/12/what-is-whooping-cough-and-how-can-i-prevent-my-children-catching-it/">https://ukhsa.blog.gov.uk/2024/04/12/what-is-whooping-cough-and-how-can-i-prevent-my-children-catching-it/</a></p>	<p>Text reads: If you're pregnant, getting vaccinated gives your child the best protection against whooping cough. Getting vaccinated is quick and easy. Speak to your midwife or contact your GP practice.</p>
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## Blogs

We have published a blog which raises awareness of whooping cough and how vaccines are the best defence:

- [UKHSA blog: What is whooping cough and how can I prevent my children catching it?](#)


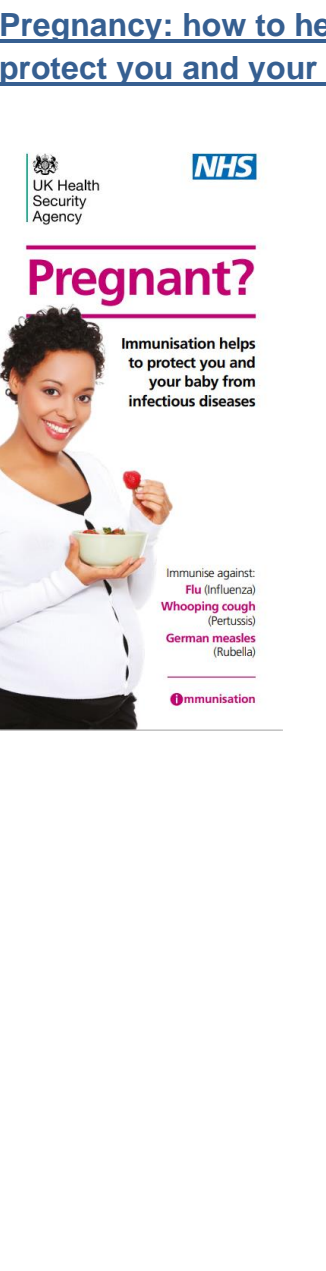
## Health publications


Paper copies of many posters, leaflets and other resources aimed at pregnant women are available to order for free (please register/login using your work email address) at [www.healthpublications.gov.uk](http://www.healthpublications.gov.uk)

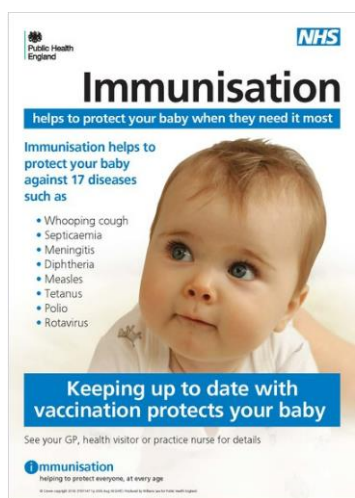
### Pregnancy

Health publication	Type	Versions
<a href="#">If you could get pregnant, act now to protect against rubella</a>	<p>Leaflet</p> <p>Poster to display in GP surgeries focussing on making sure pregnant women are protected</p>	

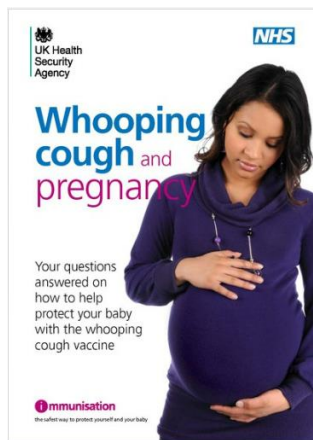


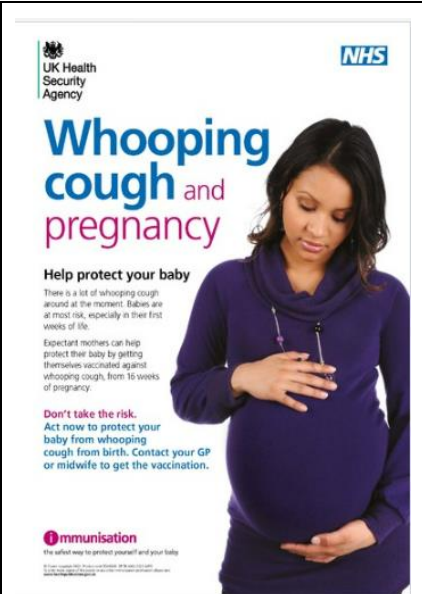
	<p>against German measles (rubella)</p>	
<p><b><u>Pregnancy: how to help protect you and your baby</u></b></p> 	<p><b>Leaflet</b></p> <p>This leaflet describes the vaccinations that help protect you and your baby during and after pregnancy.</p> <p>This leaflet explains:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the flu vaccine</li> <li>• the whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine</li> <li>• the rubella (German measles) vaccine</li> </ul> <p>These vaccinations are recommended for women who are pregnant. Rubella vaccination is also recommended for women who require protection before becoming pregnant again.</p>	<p>Paper copies of this leaflet are available free to order or download in the following languages:</p> <p><a href="#">English</a>, <a href="#">Albanian</a>, <a href="#">Arabic</a>, <a href="#">Bengali</a>, <a href="#">Bulgarian</a>, <a href="#">Chinese (simplified)</a>, <a href="#">Chinese (traditional, Cantonese)</a>, <a href="#">Estonian</a>, <a href="#">Farsi</a>, <a href="#">French</a>, <a href="#">Greek</a>, <a href="#">Gujarati</a>, <a href="#">Hindi</a>, <a href="#">Latvian</a>, <a href="#">Lithuanian</a>, <a href="#">Panjabi</a>, <a href="#">Pashto</a>, <a href="#">Polish</a>, <a href="#">Portuguese</a>, <a href="#">Romanian</a>, <a href="#">Romany</a>, <a href="#">Russian</a>, <a href="#">Somali</a>, <a href="#">Spanish</a>, <a href="#">Tagalog</a>, <a href="#">Turkish</a>, <a href="#">Twi</a>, <a href="#">Ukrainian</a>, <a href="#">Urdu</a> and <a href="#">Yiddish</a>.</p> <p>An <a href="#">English large print</a> version is available to order.</p> <p>A <a href="#">Braille version</a> of this leaflet is available to order.</p>

		<p>An audio version of this leaflet is available to <a href="#">download</a>.</p> <p>A <a href="#">quick links poster</a> with QR codes to the Pregnancy: how to help protect you and your baby and the COVID-19 vaccination: a guide on pregnancy and breastfeeding leaflets is available to download.</p>
<p><b><u>Vaccination information for pregnant women</u></b></p>  <p>The poster features the UK Health Security Agency logo and a 'Quick links' icon. The main title is 'Vaccination information for pregnant women' with the subtitle 'Having your vaccines is the best way to protect you and your baby from infectious disease'. It includes two QR codes: one for 'COVID-19 vaccination' and another for 'Routine vaccines' (pertussis, tetanus, cough/cold, and flu). Each QR code has a 'SCAN ME' button below it. The poster also includes 'Instructions' for using the QR codes on a smartphone.</p>	<p><b>Poster</b></p> <p>This poster can be displayed in all maternity, GP practice and vaccination settings to signpost women to the vaccination guidance.</p>	<p>Translated versions are available.</p>
<p><b><u>Immunisation: helps to protect your baby when they needed it</u></b></p>	<p><b>Poster</b></p> <p>This poster can be displayed in all maternity, GP practice, routine and COVID-19 vaccination settings to raise awareness of the childhood immunisation schedule</p>	

		
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### Whooping cough

Health publication	Type	Versions
<p><b><u>Whooping cough and pregnancy:</u></b> Your questions answered on how to help protect your baby with the whooping cough vaccine</p> 	<p><b>A5 booklet</b></p> <p>The leaflet provides in-depth information on: why the vaccine is needed, how maternal pertussis vaccination helps to protect babies from whooping cough, when expectant mothers can have the vaccine and why this vaccine is so important.</p>	
<p><b><u>Whooping cough and pregnancy</u></b></p>	<p><b>Poster</b></p> <p>This poster can be displayed in GP practices, maternity units and community health care settings. It features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how maternal pertussis</li> </ul>	

	<p>vaccination helps to protect babies from whooping cough</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• when expectant mothers can have the vaccine.</li> </ul>	
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## Q&A

### Pregnancy and vaccination

#### Are there any risks to you or your baby if you are vaccinated whilst pregnant?

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) in the UK completed a large study of the safety of the vaccine in pregnancy in 2014. This study, including nearly 18,000 vaccinated women, found no risks to pregnancy associated with the vaccine and rates of normal, healthy births were no different to those in unvaccinated women. Similar vaccines are also routinely recommended during pregnancy in the US where no risks to pregnancy have been found.

Other published studies from different countries offering maternal pertussis vaccine are also reassuring with similar pregnancy outcomes in vaccinated and unvaccinated pregnancies.

The whooping cough vaccine is not a live vaccine so it can't cause whooping cough in you or your baby if you have the vaccine. It's safer for you to have the vaccine than to risk your newborn baby catching whooping cough.

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. All the parts of the vaccine are killed (inactivated) and it can be safely given in pregnancy.

#### How does getting vaccinated during pregnancy protect your baby?

The protection 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 themselves at 2 months of age. Babies are offered whooping cough vaccination at 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age as part of their routine immunisations, and a pre-school booster is also offered to children three years later.

### **Why are pregnant women advised to have the whooping cough vaccine?**

Getting vaccinated while you're pregnant is highly effective in protecting your baby from developing whooping cough in the first few weeks of their life.

The immunity you get from the vaccine will pass to your baby through the placenta and provide passive protection for them until they are old enough to be routinely vaccinated against whooping cough at 8 weeks old.

## **Whooping cough**

### **When should I have the whooping cough vaccine?**

The best time to get vaccinated to protect your baby from whooping cough is from 20 weeks up to 32 weeks of pregnancy, ideally after the 20-week scan. This maximises the chance that your baby will be protected from birth, through the transfer of your antibodies before he or she is born.

If for any reason you miss having the vaccine, you can still have it up until you go into labour. However, this is not ideal, as your baby is less likely to get protection from you. At this stage of pregnancy, having the vaccination may not directly protect your baby, but would help protect you from whooping cough and from passing it on to your baby.

### **Is the whooping cough vaccine safe in pregnancy?**

It's understandable that you might have concerns about the safety of having a vaccine during pregnancy, but there's no evidence to suggest that the whooping cough vaccine is unsafe for you or your unborn baby.

Pertussis-containing vaccine (whooping cough vaccine) has been used routinely in pregnant women in the UK since October 2012, and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is carefully monitoring its safety.

The [MHRA's study of around 20,000 vaccinated women published in the British Medical Journal \(BMJ\)](#) found no evidence of risks to pregnancy or babies.

A number of other countries, including the US, Argentina, Belgium, Spain, Australia and New Zealand, currently recommend vaccination against whooping cough in pregnancy.

Read more about [why vaccines are safe and important](#).

### **Is whooping cough vaccination in pregnancy working?**

Yes, it is. Published research from the UK vaccination programme shows that vaccinating pregnant women against whooping cough has been highly effective in protecting young babies until they can have their first vaccination when they are 8 weeks old.

Babies born to women vaccinated at least a week before birth had a 91% reduced risk of becoming ill with whooping cough in their first weeks of life, compared to babies whose mothers had not been vaccinated.

An additional benefit is that the protection the mother receives from the vaccination will lower her own risk of infection and of passing whooping cough on to her baby.

### **Which whooping cough vaccine will I be given?**

As there is no whooping cough-only vaccine, the vaccine you'll be given also protects against polio, diphtheria and tetanus. The vaccine is called Boostrix IPV.

Boostrix IPV is similar to the [4-in-1 vaccine](#) – the pre-school booster that's routinely given to children before they start school.

You can read the manufacturer's [patient information leaflet for Boostrix IPV](#).

### **What are the side effects of the whooping cough vaccine?**

After having the whooping cough vaccine, you may have some mild side effects such as swelling, redness or tenderness where the vaccine is injected in your upper arm. This is normal after having a vaccine and it should only last a few days.

Other side effects can include a high temperature, irritation at the injection site, nausea and loss of appetite, tiredness and headache. Serious side effects are extremely rare.

### **What is whooping cough?**

Whooping cough (medically known as pertussis) is a bacterial infection of the lungs and airways, which spreads very easily and can cause serious health problems for babies and young children. It causes long bouts of coughing and choking, making it hard to breathe. The "whoop" is caused by gasping for breath after each bout of coughing, though babies do not always make this noise which means whooping cough can be hard to recognise.

Read more about [whooping cough symptoms](#).

### **Should I be concerned about whooping cough?**

Whooping cough is a highly infectious, serious illness that can lead to [pneumonia](#) and brain damage, particularly in young babies. Most babies with whooping cough will need hospital treatment, and when whooping cough is very severe they may die.

Research from the vaccination programme in England shows that vaccinating pregnant women against whooping cough has been highly effective in protecting young babies until they can receive their own vaccinations from 8 weeks of age.



In keeping with usual disease patterns, which see cases increasing every 3 to 5 years in England, whooping cough cases have fallen in all age groups since 2012. The greatest fall has been in young babies targeted by the pregnancy vaccination programme.

Cases of whooping cough in older age groups are still high compared to pre-2012 levels. The number of cases was particularly high in 2016, in line with the typical 3- to 5-yearly peak in disease rates.

Babies can be infected by people with whooping cough in these older age groups, so it is still important for pregnant women to be vaccinated to protect their babies.

### **But aren't babies vaccinated against whooping cough to protect them?**

Yes, they are, but the babies that have been getting whooping cough are generally too young to have started their normal vaccinations, so they are not yet protected.

### **So, how can I protect my baby against whooping cough?**

The only way you can help protect your baby from getting whooping cough in their first few weeks after birth is by having the whooping cough vaccine yourself while you are pregnant.

After vaccination, your body produces antibodies to protect against whooping cough. You will then pass this protection to your unborn baby.

### **Will the whooping cough vaccine in pregnancy give me whooping cough?**

No. The whooping cough vaccine is not a "live" vaccine. This means it does not contain whooping cough (or polio, diphtheria or tetanus), and cannot cause whooping cough in you, or in your baby.

### **Will my baby still need to be vaccinated against whooping cough at 8 weeks if I've had the vaccine while pregnant?**

Yes. Whenever you have the whooping cough vaccine, your baby will still need to be vaccinated according to the normal [NHS vaccination schedule](#) when they reach 8 weeks old. Babies are protected against whooping cough by the [6-in-1 vaccine](#).

### **How can I get the whooping cough vaccination?**

The vaccine is available from your GP, though some antenatal clinics also offer it. You may be offered the vaccination at a routine antenatal appointment, usually after your 20-week scan.

If you are more than 20 weeks pregnant and have not been offered the vaccine, talk to your midwife or GP and make an appointment to get vaccinated.

**I was vaccinated against whooping cough as a child, do I need to get vaccinated again?**

Yes, because any protection you may have had through either having whooping cough or being vaccinated when you were young is likely to have worn off and will not protect your baby.

**I was vaccinated against whooping cough in a previous pregnancy, do I need to be vaccinated again?**

Yes, you should get re-vaccinated in each pregnancy to maximise protection for your baby.

**How do I spot whooping cough in my baby?**

Be alert to the [signs and symptoms of whooping cough](#), which include severe coughing fits that may be accompanied by difficulty breathing (or pauses in breathing in young infants) or vomiting after coughing, and the characteristic "whoop" sound. Young babies might not make the "whoop" sound.

If you are worried your baby may have whooping cough, contact your doctor immediately.



# About the UK Health Security Agency

UKHSA is responsible for protecting every member of every community from the impact of infectious diseases, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents and other health threats. We provide intellectual, scientific and operational leadership at national and local level, as well as on the global stage, to make the nation health secure.

[UKHSA](#) is an executive agency, sponsored by the [Department of Health and Social Care](#).

[www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-health-security-agency](http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-health-security-agency)

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Sustainable Development Goals

