

Diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (whooping cough)

Immunisation Information

The National Immunisation Program schedule provides free diphtheria-tetanus-whooping cough vaccine to children at 18 months of age.

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is caused by bacteria which are found in the mouth, throat and nose. Diphtheria causes a membrane to grow around the inside of the throat. This can make it difficult to swallow, breathe and can even lead to suffocation.

The bacteria produce a poison which can spread around the body and cause serious complications such as paralysis and heart failure. Around 10 per cent of people who contract diphtheria die from it.

Diphtheria can be caught through coughs and sneezes from an infected person.

Tetanus

Tetanus is caused by bacteria which are present in soils, dust and manure. The bacteria can enter the body through a wound which may be as small as a pin prick. Tetanus cannot be passed from person to person.

Tetanus is an often fatal disease which attacks the nervous system. It causes muscle spasms first felt in the neck and jaw muscles. Tetanus can lead to breathing difficulties, painful convulsions and abnormal heart rhythms.

Because of the effective immunisation, tetanus is now rare in Australia, but it still occurs in people who have never been immunised against the disease or who have not had their booster vaccines.

Whooping cough

Whooping cough is a highly contagious disease which affects the air passages and breathing. The disease causes severe coughing spasms. Between these spasms, the child gasps for breath. Coughing spasms are often followed by vomiting and the cough can last for months.

Whooping cough is most serious in babies under 12 months of age and often requires admission to hospital. Whooping cough can lead to complications such as haemorrhage, convulsions, pneumonia, coma, inflammation of the brain, permanent brain damage and long term lung damage. Around one in every 200 children under six months of age who catches whooping cough will die.

Whooping cough can be caught through coughs and sneezes from an infected person. Parents and family members are the main source of infection for babies.

Diphtheria-tetanus-whooping cough immunisation

Diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough can be prevented with a safe and effective combination vaccine.

The vaccine contains a small amount of diphtheria and tetanus toxins, which are modified to make them harmless. It also contains purified parts of the pertussis bacterium with small amounts of antibiotics and preservative.

Children should have a free booster dose of this vaccine at 18 months of age.

Possible side effects of diphtheria-tetanus-whooping cough vaccine

Reactions to diphtheria-tetanus-whooping cough vaccine are much less frequent than the complications of the diseases.

Common side effects:

- irritable, crying, unsettled and generally unhappy
- drowsiness or tiredness
- low grade fever
- soreness, redness and swelling at the injection site
- a temporary small lump at the injection site.

Uncommon side effect:

- large local reaction.

Sometimes a booster dose of diphtheria-tetanus-whooping cough vaccine can cause a very large local reaction of redness and swelling to the limb.

This reaction should be reported to your immunisation provider and may require a visit to the doctor.

Extremely rare side effect:

- severe allergic reaction.

If mild reactions do occur, they may last one to two days. The side effects can be reduced by:

- placing a cold, wet cloth on the sore injection site
- giving extra fluids and not overdressing if your child has a fever
- giving your child paracetamol to reduce any discomfort (note the recommended dose for the age of your child)
- If reactions are severe or persistent, or if you are worried, contact your doctor or hospital.

Pre-immunisation checklist

Before your child is immunised, tell the doctor or nurse if any of the following apply:

- Are unwell on the day of immunisation (temperature over 38.5 °C).
- Have had a severe reaction to any vaccine.
- Have a severe allergy to any vaccine component (for example, neomycin).

Further information

The following websites offer further information:

www.betterhealthchannel.vic.gov.au

www.immunise.health.gov.au



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