

Diphtheria tetanus pertussis - for children

Tetanus is caused by bacteria that live in soil, dust and manure. Tetanus causes infection when it enters the body through a break in the skin. Diphtheria and pertussis (whooping cough) are spread through the coughs and sneezes of an infected person. Around 10 per cent of people exposed to diphtheria die from the disease.

Tetanus is often fatal

Tetanus attacks the nervous system leading to:

- Muscle spasms, which begin in the jaw and neck
- Breathing difficulties
- Painful convulsions
- Abnormal heart rhythms.

A break in the skin as small as a pinprick can allow tetanus to enter the body and cause infection.

Diphtheria causes a number of problems

Diphtheria leads to:

- Difficulty swallowing and breathing – caused by a membrane that grows in the throat as a result of the diphtheria infection. This can lead to suffocation.
- Paralysis and heart failure – when a poison produced by the bacteria spreads around the body.

Diphtheria bacteria are found in the mouth, nose and throat.

Pertussis makes breathing difficult

Pertussis (whooping cough) affects the air passages and breathing and can lead to:

- Coughing spasms – your child will gasp for breath between coughs
- Vomiting after a coughing spasm.

Pertussis is most harmful to young babies

In babies younger than 12 months, pertussis can lead to serious complications, such as:

- Haemorrhage
- Convulsions and coma
- Pneumonia (long term lung damage is possible)
- Inflammation of the brain
- Permanent brain damage.

A combined diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis vaccine is given

A combined diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP) vaccine is given to children when they are:

- Two, four and six months old
- Four years old.
- Adolescents 15 to 17 (from 1 January 2004)

Diphtheria and tetanus (ADT) is given to 15 to 19 year olds, prior to finishing school.

Your child requires all these injections to be fully protected. As adults, they will also need a combined diphtheria and tetanus booster on their 50th birthday.

Triple Antigen was used as part of the childhood immunisation schedule until 1999. It has been replaced by Infanrix because this newer formulation causes fewer side effects.

One in a million chance of serious side effects

There is less than one in a million chance your child will develop serious side effects – such as encephalopathy (brain inflammation) – from the vaccine.

Mild side effects

Some children will develop mild side effects, such as:

- Low grade fever. This makes them unsettled for two days after the injection
- Soreness and swelling in the area where the injection was given.

Reactions to DTP vaccine are very much less frequent than serious complications of the disease.

Reducing fever and soreness

You can help prevent injection site soreness and fever by:

- Not overdressing your child
- Placing a cold, wet cloth over the sore injection spot
- Giving your child paracetamol (such as Panadol) – use the recommended dose for their age.

See over ...

Pre-immunisation checklist

Before immunisation, tell your doctor or nurse if your child:

- Is unwell
- Has ever had a serious reaction to any vaccine or if they have allergies.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local Maternal and Child Health centre
- Department of Human Services, Tel. (03) 9637 4144.

Things to remember

- Diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis can lead to death.
- Serious side effects to immunisation are very rare.
- Several injections must be given to properly immunise your child.

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