NSW Health

Diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (whooping cough) (dTpa) vaccine

Parent Information Sheet

The Australian Government makes some vaccines for teenagers free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP).

Q. What are diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (whooping cough)?

Diphtheria is a bacterial infection that spreads easily and can cause breathing problems, skin sores, or inflammation of the heart muscle or nerves.

Tetanus is a dangerous disease caused by a bacterium. It that affects the nerves and can cause painful muscle spasms, lockjaw, and other complications like pneumonia or broken bones (from the muscle spasms).

Whooping cough is a bacterial infection that causes severe coughing and trouble breathing. In babies, it can be life threatening. In older children and adults, the cough can last for months.

Q. How do these diseases spread?

Diphtheria spreads through coughs, sneezes, or contact with discharges from an infected person's mouth, nose, or skin.

Tetanus is caused by bacteria in soil. It enters the body through cuts, scratches, or wounds contaminated with dirt, dust or manure.

Whooping cough spreads through droplets from coughing or sneezing. An untreated person can spread it for up to 3 weeks after their cough starts.

Q. How do vaccines work?

Vaccines help your immune system fight infections. If a vaccinated person gets exposed to these infections, their immune system can fight it better, either preventing the disease developing or making it less severe.

Q. How effective is the vaccine?

The vaccine is very effective in preventing diphtheria and tetanus and about 80% effective against whooping cough.

Q. How many doses does my child need?

If your child has completed a course of 3 doses, your child needs one booster dose of the **dTpa vaccine** at 12-13 years to stay protected into early adulthood.

If your child has never had a diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine, they will need 3 doses of a diphtheria-tetanus vaccine. At least one of the vaccine doses should also protect against whooping cough, with at least 4 weeks between doses.

Q. Who should get this vaccine?

All teenagers should get one dose of the **dTpa vaccine** to protect against diphtheria, tetanus, and whooping cough.

This booster is important to keep their immunity strong after earlier childhood vaccines. If your child had a diphtheria-tetanus vaccine before, they can still get the dTpa vaccine to add protection against whooping cough.

Q. Who should not get the vaccine?

Do not give the vaccine to anyone who:

- had a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to a previous dose
- had a severe allergic reaction to an ingredient in the vaccine.

Q. Can pregnant people get the vaccine?

Yes. Pregnant people should get the vaccine between 20 and 32 weeks of every pregnancy, this can help protect the baby in its first few months.

If the person is being vaccinated at school or through the Intensive English Centre (IEC), then they will need to get vaccinated at the GP or pharmacy. On vaccination day, nurses will ask female students if they are or could be pregnant. If a student says yes, she will not be vaccinated. She will be advised to talk to her parent or doctor and will be given contact details for a support service.

Q. How safe are vaccines?

Vaccines in Australia are very safe. They must pass strict safety checks before approval by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). The TGA also monitors vaccine safety after use.

Q. What is in the vaccine?

The vaccine contains small amounts of:

- aluminium hydroxide and phosphate
- formaldehyde
- polysorbate 80
- glycine.

It was also exposed to bovine-derived materials during manufacturing.

Q. What are the side effects of the vaccine?

Mild side effects are common and may include:

- redness, swelling, or pain where the shot was given
- fever.

Serious side effects are very rare.

For more information, check the Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) at health.nsw.gov.au/schoolvaccination. If you are concerned about side effects, contact your GP.

Q. What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis is a very rare but severe allergic reaction. It can cause unconsciousness or death if not treated quickly. Immunisation providers are trained to manage anaphylaxis.

Q. What if a person had a reaction to an earlier vaccine?

If the person did not have an immediate severe allergic reaction to a previous vaccine, it is safe for them to get the dTpa vaccine.