Rotavirus – immunisation

Summary

- Rotavirus is the most common cause of severe and life-threatening diarrhoea in children in Australia.
- Since they began in 2007, rotavirus vaccinations have prevented more than 7,000 hospital admissions every year.
- All babies can receive free immunisation against rotavirus with two doses of an oral vaccine.
- The first dose of rotavirus vaccine must be given by 14 weeks and six days of age.
- Serious reactions to the rotavirus vaccine are rare.

Rotavirus causes a serious infectious form of gastroenteritis. Some people show no symptoms, but very young children are more likely to develop serious symptoms ranging from mild diarrhoea to life-threatening dehydrating diarrhoea that requires hospitalisation and can lead to death.

A national rotavirus vaccination program began in 2007 and it is estimated that the number of hospital admissions has decreased by more than 7,000 each year. Those who do go into hospital are usually less severely affected.

You can reduce the risk of rotavirus infection for your baby with immunisation. All children should receive the vaccine. If they are not immunised, they could contract rotavirus if their food, water or hands are contaminated with the faeces (poo) of an infected person.

Serious side effects or allergic reactions to the vaccine are rare. If you are concerned about your child’s reaction to any vaccine, see your doctor immediately.

Immunisation against rotavirus

Protection against rotavirus is available free of charge under the National Immunisation Program Schedule. In Victoria, immunisation against rotavirus is free for babies, and it is given by mouth in two doses at two and four months of age. The first dose must be given by the time babies are 14 weeks and six days of age and the second dose must be given by 24 weeks and six days.

The vaccine does not protect against other types of diarrhoea, but it reduces the risk of life-threatening diarrhoea caused by rotavirus.

Pre-immunisation checklist

Before receiving the vaccine, tell your doctor or nurse if your child:

- is older than the recommended age ranges for either dose
- is unwell (temperature over 38.5°C)
- has had a serious reaction to any vaccine
- has had a severe allergy to anything
- has a history of a chronic gastrointestinal disease
- has had intussusception or a congenital abnormality that may lead to intussusception
- is taking steroid medication
- has received a blood transfusion or blood products
- has lowered immunity due to immune system deficiency, abnormal blood conditions or disorders, cancer, HIV or certain medications
- lives in a household with someone who has lowered immunity.
Side effects of rotavirus vaccine

The vaccine against rotavirus is generally effective and safe, although all medication can have unwanted side effects.

Rare side effects of the rotavirus vaccine

There is a very small risk of a serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to any vaccine. This is why you are advised to stay at the clinic or medical surgery for at least 15 minutes following immunisation in case further treatment is required.

Intussusception (a blockage caused by one portion of the bowel sliding into the next piece of bowel like the pieces of a telescope) can occur (on rare occasions) in babies, mainly in the first one to seven days following the first or second dose of rotavirus vaccine. Signs that a baby may have intussusception include:

- bouts of crying
- pale appearance
- pulling the legs up to the stomach.

This can then develop into vomiting or passing blood in their stools (poo).

Recent studies suggest that there is a slight increase in the risk of intussusception among babies in the first one to seven days following the first or second dose of rotavirus vaccine. The risk is approximately six extra cases of intussusception for every 100,000 infants vaccinated or 14 additional babies a year getting intussusception in Australia.

Concerns about immunisation side effects

If any side effect following immunisation is unexpected, persistent or severe, or if you are worried about yourself or your child’s condition after a vaccination, see your doctor or immunisation nurse as soon as possible or go directly to a hospital. Immunisation side effects may be reported to SAEFVIC, the Victorian vaccine safety and central reporting service.

In other states or territories, you can discuss with your immunisation provider how to report adverse events. It is also important to seek medical advice if you (or your child) are unwell, as this may be due to other illness rather than due to the vaccination.

Immunisation and HALO

The immunisations you may need are decided by your health, age, lifestyle and occupation. Together, these factors are referred to as HALO. Talk to your doctor or immunisation provider if you think you or someone in your care has health, age, lifestyle or occupation factors that could mean immunisation is necessary. You can check your immunisation HALO using the Immunisation for Life infographic (pdf).

Where to get help

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Your doctor
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Your local government immunisation service

- Maternal and Child Health Line (24 hours, 7 days) Tel. 132 229
- NURSE-ON-CALL, Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Immunisation Section, Department of Health and Human Services, Victorian Government Tel. 1300 882 008

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
• **National Immunisation Information Line.** Tel. 1800 671 811

• Your local pharmacist

• **SAEFVIC.** Tel. 1300 882 924 (option 1) – the line is attended between 9 am and 4 pm and you can leave a message at all other times

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Department of Health and Human Services - RHP&R - Health Protection - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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