BCG vaccine
Help protect your baby against TB

2017 Edition
This leaflet is about the Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine, which is offered to help protect your baby against tuberculosis (TB).

What is the BCG vaccine?

The BCG vaccine contains a weakened form of the bacteria (germs) that cause TB.

The vaccine doesn’t actually cause TB, but it helps your baby develop protection (immunity) against the disease in case he or she ever comes into contact with it.

Who is offered the vaccine?

The BCG vaccine is offered to babies who are more likely than the general population to come into contact with someone with TB. This is because they either lived in an area with high rates of TB, or their parents or grandparents came from a country with high rates of TB. These include countries in south-east Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and some countries in eastern Europe.

The vaccine is usually offered soon after birth, either while your baby is still in hospital or soon after you go back home. However, it can be given at any time if necessary.
What is TB?

TB is a serious infectious disease. TB can progress quickly, more so in young children and babies, and can lead to TB meningitis (swelling of the lining of the brain) in babies.

In young people and adults it usually affects the lungs, although it can also affect the lymph glands, brain, joints, kidneys or bones. Most people in the UK recover fully after treatment, but this usually takes several months.

How is TB spread?

TB is usually spread when people with infectious TB in their lungs or throat cough or sneeze. However, it usually takes close contact with an infectious person over a long period of time to catch the disease.

Not everyone with TB in their lungs is infectious. Once they’re taking the right treatment, most people will become non-infectious after about two weeks.

Treating TB takes a long time. Preventing the disease is much easier.
How common is TB?

TB is not a common disease. In Scotland, around 350 new cases of TB are diagnosed every year. Most of these cases occur in adults over the age of 25.

Cases of TB can be found all over the world. For a list of countries with a high rate of TB ask the health professional who gave you this leaflet or visit www.immunisationscotland.org.uk/TB

With increasing numbers of people travelling around the world, the risk of people coming into contact with the disease or bringing it into this country also increases.

What are the symptoms of TB?

TB can attack almost any part of the body, so the symptoms can be different. The symptoms may also be different in a baby from those in an adult. However, as TB is infectious, it’s important that you can recognise the signs and symptoms. You should get medical help if you, your baby or any other member of your family has:

- a persistent moist cough that lasts several weeks
- a fever and unusual sweats at night
- been losing weight for no obvious reason
- been feeling tired and unwell
- been coughing up blood.
How is the vaccine given?

The vaccine is injected just under the skin of the upper part of the left arm.

Are there any side effects?

Immediately after the vaccine is given, a raised blister will appear. This shows that the vaccine has been given properly.

Within two to six weeks, a small spot will appear. This may be quite sore for a few days, but it will gradually get better and may leave a small scar.

Your baby may develop a small sore where the vaccine was given. If this is leaking and needs to be covered, use a dry dressing – never a waterproof plaster or creams – until a scab forms. It’s better to leave the sore uncovered if possible and it’s fine to leave it uncovered when bathing. This sore may take several months to heal completely.

If you’re worried, or you think the sore has become infected, see your GP.

Is the vaccine safe?

Before they’re allowed to be used, all medicines (including vaccines) are tested for safety and effectiveness. Once they’re in use, the safety of vaccines continues to be monitored.
Are there any reasons why my baby shouldn’t have the BCG vaccine?

The BCG vaccine should be delayed if your baby has a high fever. The BCG vaccine may also be delayed in babies born to mothers who received treatment during pregnancy or breastfeeding that may have weakened their immune system (please consult your own GP practice and local TB nurse for further advice if this applies to you).

The BCG vaccine shouldn’t be given if your baby:

- has a weak immune system due to any disease or treatment
- is HIV positive
- is suffering from a generalised septic skin condition – babies with eczema can be given the vaccine in an area without skin lesions (broken skin)
- has had a confirmed anaphylactic reaction (severe allergic reaction) to an ingredient of the vaccine.

Do I need to know anything else?

Your baby can start their routine childhood immunisations, including diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), pneumococcal, polio, Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib), rotavirus and meningococcal B (MenB) from 2 months of age, regardless of when they have their BCG vaccine.
However, your baby shouldn’t be given another vaccine in the same limb as the BCG vaccine for at least three months afterwards, otherwise their glands may swell.

You should also make sure that there’s a record of the BCG vaccine in your child’s Personal Child Health Record (Red Book).

If you answer ‘Yes’ to any of the questions below, your baby may need a BCG vaccine if they haven’t already had one.

• Are you, your family, your partner or their family from a country with a high rate of TB? These include countries in south-east Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and some countries in eastern Europe. (If in doubt, talk to a health professional or visit www.immunisationscotland.org.uk/TB)

• Will you and your baby be going to live for more than three months, or travel frequently in, one of these countries in the near future?

• Is there anyone in your house, or anyone else who is likely to have prolonged contact with your baby, who either has TB (or has had it in the past) or comes from one of these countries?
Where can I get more information?

- visit www.immunisationscotland.org.uk
- call the NHS inform helpline on 0800 22 44 88 (textphone 18001 0800 22 44 88). The helpline is open every day, please check the website for the opening hours. It also provides an interpreting service.
- ask the health professional who gave you this leaflet.

This resource may also be made available on request in the following formats:

0131 314 5300
nhs.healthscotland-alternativeformats@nhs.net