

Vaccination against stomach and intestinal infection caused by rotavirus

Child healthcare in Gävleborg offers free vaccinations against rotavirus infection. The vaccination is given to newborn babies from six weeks of age. The vaccine protects against diarrhoea and vomiting caused by rotavirus.

What is rotavirus?

Rotavirus is a commonly occurring virus, widespread throughout the world, which infects the alimentary canal (stomach and intestines).

Small children can become very ill

A rotavirus infection is the most common cause of serious alimentary canal infection in small children. The virus is very contagious. Most people are infected early on in life, and nearly everybody has had a rotavirus infection before the age of five.

One to three days after becoming infected, vomiting, fever and watery, frequent bouts of diarrhoea usually start suddenly. The illness usually lasts 5–8 days, but sometimes longer. Some children become very ill, with intensive vomiting and diarrhoea, which can make the child dehydrated, resulting in salt loss, cramp and encephalitis. A severe rotavirus infection may require hospital care.

It is possible to become infected and fall ill several times, but the illness is worst the first time round. Rotavirus infections are most common in February–March.

How dangerous is rotavirus infection?

The infection is a strain on the children infected and their families, but nearly all children recover without hospital care. Children under the age of two are at the greatest risk of suffering a serious infection with complications. Permanent damage is rare. Deaths are very unusual in Sweden.

The vaccine Rotarix®

The vaccine offered in Gävleborg is called Rotarix®. It contains weakened viruses, which give the child a mild infection, often not noticeable. Through the body's defence system, the child develops immunity and is protected against diarrhoea and vomiting caused by the most frequently occurring types of rotavirus.

Rotarix® provides good protection against rotavirus infections. In particular, it protects against infection that leads to hospital care. The vaccine protects for at least two years. Newborn babies need the protection most.

Rotarix® was introduced in 2006 in Europe and more than 310 million doses have been given. More and more countries are introducing general vaccination against rotavirus in their national vaccination program. In March, 2015, 77 countries had introduced rotavirus vaccine in their vaccination program including Australia, USA and countries in South America and Africa, and the following nine countries in Europe: Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg, Finland, Estonia, Germany, Great Britain, Norway and Latvia.

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How and when is the vaccine given?

The vaccine consists of a solution that is available in a dose syringe. It is given by mouth on two occasions from the age of six weeks. The vaccine contains saccharose and tastes sweet. It can be given irrespective of what the child has eaten. If the child spits out or vomits up most of the vaccine straight away, another dose is given. Dose 1 should be given when the child is between six and eight weeks, at six weeks at the earliest but preferably before twelve weeks. No later than before 16 weeks of age.

Dose 2 is given one month after the first dose and preferably before 16 weeks. No later than before 24 weeks of age. After 24 weeks of age, the vaccine is not given. Babies who are born prematurely, but after week 27 of pregnancy, can be vaccinated as above. The vaccine can be given together with the other vaccines in the national vaccination programme for children.

Side effects

A common side effect, that affects one child in 100 or more, is light diarrhoea, vomiting and fever. A less common side effect is stomach pain, gas and skin rash. A very rare side effect is intestinal invagination. This means that the last section of the small intestine is pushed into the large intestine and creates a blockage. The signs of intestinal invagination may be intensive, that comes and goes at intervals, fairly long ones to begin with, but gradually ever shorter. The child may be nauseous and vomit. No faeces are passed, but sometimes blood and mucus. The child becomes tired, pale and exhausted, and appears distant. If this happens, seek medical care straight away at the emergency clinic. The blockage is usually relieved through a type of enema, which is given in hospital.

Before vaccination

Tell the personnel at the child health clinic if the child

- o is allergic/oversensitive to anything
- o has had problems following a previous dose of Rotarix®
- o is ill with fever
- o is taking or has recently taken any medicine, including non-prescription
- o has recently been vaccinated with another vaccine
- o has had surgery or is being investigated for a fault in the alimentary canal
- o has an illness that reduces the resistance to infection
- o has close contact with, for example, a family member who has an impaired immune system, for example a person who has an illness or who is taking medicine that impairs the immune system.

After vaccination

Contact the nurse at the child healthcare clinic if you notice anything unusual in your child during the next few days following the vaccination. You can also telephone 1177 for healthcare advice.

More in 1177 Healthcare Guide

- o Diarrhoea in small children
- o Stomach upsets in small children – what can you do yourself?
- o Vaccination programme for children
- o Basic child healthcare programme in Gävleborg

The text is also part of *Theme Children and Parents*