
Rotavirus Vaccine Program

Questions and Answers for Parents and Caregivers

This fact sheet provides basic information for parents and caregivers. It is not intended to provide or take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you may have before you make any changes to your current diet, lifestyle or treatment.

Immunization is one of the most effective ways to protect yourself and your family against vaccine preventable diseases.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is introducing a new rotavirus vaccine (Rotarix™) to the *Publicly Funded Immunization Schedules for Ontario* to protect infants against diarrhea and vomiting caused by rotavirus infection.

What is rotavirus?

Rotavirus is a common infection that causes vomiting and diarrhea in infants and children. Rotavirus is very contagious, spreading easily from children who are already infected to other infants, children and sometimes adults. Most children are infected with rotavirus at least once by five years of age. Serious but rare symptoms commonly seen in children less than two years of age include severe diarrhea leading to hospitalization. Rotavirus infection is a major cause of visits to health care providers and hospital-stays for infants and children under five years of age in Ontario. Deaths in Ontario due to rotavirus are rare.

What are the symptoms of rotavirus?

Symptoms include fever, vomiting, watery diarrhea and stomach pain which may last from three to eight days.

When do symptoms usually appear?

Symptoms appear about 24-72 hours after a person has been exposed to the rotavirus infection.

What are the potential complications of rotavirus infection?

In infants and children, rotavirus can lead to loss of body fluids (dehydration) that may require a visit to the emergency department or admission to a hospital where intravenous (IV) fluids may need to be given. Children with weakened immune systems may experience more severe illness for a longer period of time.

At what age should the rotavirus vaccine be given?

In Ontario, the rotavirus (Rotarix™) vaccine is a publicly funded two-dose series recommended for infants at two and four months of age. The vaccine series should be completed by 24 weeks of age.

What is the risk of spreading rotavirus after being vaccinated?

The live vaccine form of the rotavirus can be in the stool or feces of infants for up to 10 days after vaccination. To prevent the spread of the live vaccine virus, anyone caring for the immunized baby should wash their hands frequently especially after changing diapers.

Who should not receive the rotavirus vaccine?

Infants should not receive the vaccine if they have:

- an allergy to the vaccine or any of its components;
- a condition or disease that weakens their immune system;
- “Severe Combined Immunodeficiency Disorder” (SCID);
- a history of intussusception (a condition where the bowels twist and become blocked);
- uncorrected congenital abdominal disorders (such as Meckel’s diverticulum); and/or
- received blood products, including immunoglobulin, within 42 days.

Consult with your health care provider if your child has a severe allergy to latex.

Administration of the rotavirus vaccine should be temporarily delayed in infants suffering from fever, diarrhea and/or vomiting.

You should always discuss the benefits and risks of any vaccine with your health care provider or local public health unit.

Is the rotavirus vaccine safe?

Yes. The rotavirus vaccine is safe. Most babies who get the rotavirus vaccine do not have any complications. Your child may become irritable or have mild, temporary diarrhea after getting a dose.

Rarely, babies may experience an allergic reaction such as itchy skin rash, shortness of breath and swelling of the face or tongue. Severe reactions are very rare and may include a slight increased risk of bowel obstruction (intussusception).

What is bowel obstruction (intussusception)?

Intussusception is a rare type of bowel obstruction that occurs when one portion of the bowel slides into an immediately adjacent segment (also known as telescoping or prolapse). Complications of this can lead to intestinal swelling, inflammation and decreased blood flow to the part of the intestines involved.

What are the symptoms of intussusception?

Symptoms of intussusception include stomach pain with severe crying (which may be brief) as well as several

episodes of vomiting and blood in the stool. A baby may act weak or become very irritable.

Is my child likely to get intussusception from the rotavirus vaccine?

Rotarix™ has been studied for risk of developing intussusception. There are a few studies that suggest a very small increase in intussusception cases during the first week after getting the rotavirus vaccine.

In large studies of the vaccine used in Ontario, children were not likely to get intussusception after getting the rotavirus vaccine.

This information still requires further investigation and studies are ongoing.

The rotavirus vaccine offers tremendous benefits by protecting infants and children from rotavirus disease. Rotavirus is the most common cause of severe diarrhea among infants and young children. According to the United States Center for Disease Control, the risk of intussusception after rotavirus vaccination is much lower than the risk of severe rotavirus disease in children who do not receive rotavirus vaccine.

How do I ensure that my child receives this vaccine?

Contact your child’s health care provider or your local public health unit for more information about how to get the vaccine for your child. This vaccine is free of charge from your health care provider. Be sure to read and understand the information that will be provided to you by your health care provider.

When should I call my health care provider?

You should seek medical attention if you believe that your child or someone in your care has had a reaction to a vaccine.

If your child experiences symptoms of intussusception (see above) within seven days after receiving the first dose of the vaccine, or anytime after receiving the vaccine, see a health care provider immediately.

Call your health care provider or go to the nearest hospital emergency department if your child has any of the following reactions within three days of receiving the vaccine:

- hives;
- swelling of the face or mouth;
- trouble breathing, hoarseness or wheezing;

- high fever (over 40°C); or
- convulsions or seizures.

Any of the reactions listed above should be reported to your health care provider who will report it to your local public health unit.

Who should I talk to if I have any questions?

For more information please contact your health care provider or your local public health unit.

How should my child's immunization be recorded?

After your child receives any immunization, make sure his/her personal immunization record (i.e., the "Yellow Card") is updated. Keep it in a safe place!