



Immunisation for school leavers



THE SAFEST WAY TO PROTECT YOUR HEALTH

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The national childhood immunisation programme has meant that dangerous diseases such as tetanus, diphtheria and polio have practically disappeared in the UK. But these diseases could come back, which is why it's so important for everyone to keep up their immunity.

In some countries, where immunisations aren't available, these diseases continue to kill. For example, in Eastern Europe there was a dramatic rise in diphtheria because fewer people were being immunised.

Immunisation – developing immunity by receiving a vaccine – is the safest, simplest and most effective way to protect yourself. A booster dose of tetanus, diphtheria and polio vaccines – the Td-polio booster – will help to keep your immunity topped up.

Tetanus

- Spread by spores, which are found mainly in soil and manure, getting into the body through open cuts
- You're particularly at risk if you work with animals or in contact with soil, or if you do any outdoor sports
- Because of immunisation, caught by only a handful of people in the UK each year
- Occurs much more frequently in less developed countries – especially where immunisation isn't available.

Diphtheria

- One of the most common causes of death in childhood, world-wide, until the 1930s.
- Usually found in countries where there is overcrowding and poor sanitation.
- Also found in developed countries where immunisation rates are low.
- Can cause damage to the heart so it's vital to get immediate treatment.

Polio

- Has been virtually eliminated in the UK because of immunisation.
- Still found in less developed countries where sanitation may be poor.
- Affects the nervous system and can lead to permanent paralysis of the legs, arms, or even the chest muscles.
- Only occurrences in this country are vaccine-related (apart from rare imported cases), so read on for the precautions you should take.



Q How does the Td-polio booster work?

The vaccines given to you contain extracts of the bacteria which cause tetanus and diphtheria and modified (tamed) viruses which cause polio. If you've already had these vaccines, then your immunity is boosted to protect you over the years ahead. If you come into contact with one of these diseases in the future, the antibodies will recognise them and fight to stop an infection taking hold.



Q If I was immunised against tetanus, diphtheria and polio as a child, am I still protected?

Not necessarily. To maintain your immunity to certain diseases you have to remind your body what the diseases are.

Immunity to tetanus and diphtheria can wear off and it's sensible to have a booster against polio too. In order for your body's defences to recognise the disease and produce the antibodies needed to fight the infection you need to keep your levels of immunity topped up.

Q How many Td-polio immunisations do I need?

You need five doses of tetanus, diphtheria and polio vaccines to build up and maintain your immunity. The first three doses you normally have as a baby, the fourth dose you have at around four-years-old, and the fifth now. You may need a further booster for tetanus or polio after another 10 years if you're travelling abroad to high-risk countries. If you think you may have missed any of the previous doses, talk to your school nurse or doctor.

When everyone is immunised, polio will be eradicated from the world and there won't be any need to immunise in future. Polio, like smallpox, will become a disease of the past.

Q How is the Td-polio booster given?

The tetanus and diphtheria immunisation is given as an injection into your upper arm. Polio vaccine is given by mouth.

Nobody likes injections, but the needles used nowadays are very small and you should only feel a tiny pin-prick. If you're a bit nervous about having the injection, tell the nurse or doctor beforehand – it's nothing to be ashamed of.

Q Can everyone have the Td-polio booster?

A very small number of people shouldn't have the booster for medical reasons; the nurse or doctor will ask you a few questions beforehand to make sure it's safe for you.





Q What should I expect after having the Td-polio booster?

Swelling and redness at the site of the injection is common. Sometimes a small painless lump develops which usually disappears within a few weeks. More severe reactions are rare, and should be reported to your doctor.

There is an extremely small chance of developing polio from the immunisation – the risk is of one case in more than 1.5 million doses used (see below).

Q Are there any special precautions I should take after having the Td-polio booster?

The polio vaccine contains live viruses which may be passed in your faeces for up to six weeks after you've been immunised. This can be a source of infection to people who aren't immune, but this is rare. Since 1970, when the booster dose vaccination was introduced, there have been fewer than five cases associated with the dose that you'll be receiving. Always make sure you wash your hands thoroughly after going to the toilet especially in the weeks after having the polio booster. If you're ever changing the nappy of a baby who's recently been given this vaccine, wash your hands before and after.

Q Are these the only immunisations I need?

When you're having your Td-Polio booster it's a good idea to check with the nurse or doctor that all your other immunisations are up-to-date, for example, measles, mumps and rubella, and for some people, hepatitis B.

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