

BCG

immunisation

for ages 10 to 14



Immunisation
protect your health for life

BCG vaccine
to protect against
tuberculosis

BCG vaccine

This leaflet explains what the BCG vaccine is and why you need it.

What is BCG?

BCG is the name of the vaccine that protects you against tuberculosis (more commonly known as TB). BCG stands for Bacillus Calmette-Guérin, named after the person who developed the vaccine. BCG contains a very weak form of the germ which causes TB. The vaccine doesn't cause TB, but it stimulates the body to start building up immunity so it can fight the disease.

BCG is 70-80% effective against TB when given to school children, with protection lasting at least 15 years.

What is TB?

TB is an infection which usually affects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body such as the bones or the brain. TB of the lungs is the most common type of TB found in the UK.

When is BCG given?

BCG is normally given between 10 and 14 years of age in school.

BCG vaccination may also be recommended for children from countries where TB is common. This may be given on arrival in this country or around the time of birth for babies born here.

Children who have been in close contact with an infectious case of TB may also be recommended BCG vaccination depending on the particular circumstances.



How can you catch TB?

You catch TB from someone who is already infected - generally from someone who has infection in their lungs and who is coughing. Coughing produces tiny droplets of saliva containing germs (bacteria) which can stay in the air for long periods of time. If you breathe in the germs they can cause the infection.

Do a lot of people catch TB?

Only a small number of people in Northern Ireland still get TB - in 2000 there were 50 cases reported. The numbers are small because:

- generally we have good living conditions;
- we can treat people with the disease quickly;
- levels of immunisation are high.

Around the world, the number of people catching and dying from TB is much higher and is increasing quite quickly in many countries.

How does TB make you ill?

TB usually begins as a small inflamed area in one lung. This inflamed area then grows and if it's not stopped in time it spreads to the other lung. Symptoms which then develop can include:

- a cough which can last for weeks;
- a fever;
- sweating - especially at night;
- weight loss;
- feeling tired;
- spitting up blood.

Sometimes TB can kill you if it's not treated in time. However, death is rare because the drugs used to treat it are very effective.

How does the body fight TB?

If you catch TB, your body needs to recognise the bacteria as an enemy. The body's immune system will start making antibodies which attack the bacteria and fight the disease. If you have the BCG vaccination it prepares your body to start fighting the disease.

Are there any reasons why I should not be immunised with BCG?

There are very few reasons why you should not be immunised with BCG. You should let your school doctor or nurse or your GP know if you:

- have a very high temperature or fever;
- have had a bad reaction to any immunisation;
- have had a severe allergy to anything;
- have had a bleeding disorder;
- have had treatment for cancer;
- have any illness that affects the immune system (eg leukaemia, HIV or AIDS);
- are taking any medicine that affects the immune system (eg high dose steroids or treatments given after organ transplant or for cancers)
- are pregnant;
- have recently had glandular fever or other viral infection;
- have any other serious illness.

These don't always mean that you can't be immunised but it helps the doctor or nurse decide which are the best immunisations for you and if they need to give you any other advice. A family history of illness is never a reason for you not to be immunised.

The tuberculin or Heaf test

Before you get the BCG injection, you will have a skin test to find out if you are already immune to TB. When you go for the skin test a small amount of solution is spread on your forearm and a single use throw-away device with six tiny needles is pressed onto your skin on top of the solution. About a week later the nurse or doctor looks at the test area to check the reaction.

Depending on the amount of reaction, they will decide whether you are already immune to TB or whether you need the BCG injection.

If you have had a reaction this will go away after a while, but you might get a tiny scar. If you have a very strong reaction to the test you may need a chest x-ray.

Some people will have been given the BCG vaccine shortly after they were born. If you have had a previous BCG injection, you will not normally need another one.

What happens after immunisation?

You will normally be given the vaccine as an injection in the upper part of the left arm. Within two to six weeks of the injection a small spot will appear which may feel sore for a few days. You will probably be left with a small scar.

If there is a more severe reaction, or an infection, you may need antibiotics to treat this. It's fine to have a bath or shower as normal and go swimming after having the injection. The sore area will gradually heal up, especially if you do not cover it up. It's best to leave it uncovered but if you have to cover it with a waterproof plaster, do not leave it on for more than 1-2 hours. Keeping it covered for longer than this can result in you developing a much larger scar.

Are there any side effects?

Minor side effects can occasionally occur. These may include:

- swelling or ulceration at the site of the injection;
- swelling of glands in the armpit;
- less commonly, headache, fever and dizziness.

Remember, prevention is simple, but treating TB will take a long time - often around 6 months.



Routine childhood immunisation programme

When to immunise	Diseases vaccine protects against	How it is given
2, 3 and 4 months old	Diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), polio and Hib	One injection
	Meningitis C	One injection
Around 15 months old	Measles, mumps and rubella	One injection
3 to 5 years old	Diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis and polio	One injection
	Measles, mumps and rubella	One injection
10 to 14 years old (and sometimes shortly after birth)	Tuberculosis (BCG vaccine)	Skin test, then one injection, if needed
14 to 18 years old	Tetanus, diphtheria and polio	One injection

If you have missed out on any of these vaccines it is never too late to catch up, speak to your GP or school nurse.

If you would like further information about immunisation, visit the DHSSPS website www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/phealth or the national immunisation website www.immunisation.nhs.uk

