

Communicable Diseases

Rotavirus Vaccine

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What is rotavirus?

Rotavirus is a common virus that infects the stomach and intestines causing gastroenteritis or the “stomach flu.” It is the major cause for serious diarrhea illness in young children in Canada. Approximately one in five cases of all childhood gastroenteritis is caused by rotavirus, with more than a third of parents seeking medical care. Almost all children will be infected at least once by five years of age.

What are the symptoms?

Rotavirus begins with a sudden fever and vomiting, followed by profuse watery diarrhea. Usually there are 10 to 20 diarrhea episodes a day. Symptoms usually appear one to three days after exposure to the virus. Some individuals get no symptoms at all. Most recover within three to eight days without serious or long-term health effects. Dehydration is the most common complication, especially among young children and the elderly. Dehydration or severe symptoms may require a visit to the emergency department or hospitalization.

How is rotavirus spread?

Rotavirus is found in the stool of ill persons and is spread person-to-person through the fecal-oral route. Common ways to get rotavirus infection include:

- When an infected person does not carefully wash their hands after using the washroom.
- Close contact or living in a house with another person, especially a child who has rotavirus infection.
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with rotavirus, and then placing these objects (e.g. toys) or fingers in the mouth.

When and for how long is a person able to spread rotavirus?

Usually, a person who has rotavirus infection is contagious from the moment they start to feel ill up until 24 hours after the diarrhea stops.

How can rotavirus infection be prevented?

- Thorough handwashing is the best prevention. Wash hands often with soap and warm water after using the toilet, diapering, and before preparing or eating food.
- Do not prepare food for others if you have symptoms of vomiting or diarrhea.
- Anyone who is ill with diarrhea or vomiting should stay home from school, day nursery, or work and should not return until being symptom-free for at least 24 hours. This is especially important for those who work with food, children, the elderly or in a health care setting.
- Get infants vaccinated. A rotavirus vaccine has been approved for use in Canada since August 2006.

What is the rotavirus vaccine?

The rotavirus vaccine, RotaTeq® is a live virus vaccine that protects infants and children from five of the six most common strains of rotavirus infection in Canada and around the world.

How is RotaTeq® given?

The vaccine is a liquid given by mouth in three doses at two, four and six months of age. It can be given on the same visit as other childhood immunizations. The first dose must be given between six and 12 weeks of age. Doses should be spaced one to two months apart. If a dose is missed, all doses should be given by 32 weeks of age. If the child spits out some or all of the vaccine, that dose does not need to be given again.

Is the rotavirus vaccine safe?

Yes. RotaTeq® has been studied in over 70,000 children around the world and, like all vaccines, continues to be monitored for safety. Side effects from RotaTeq® are infrequent, usually mild and do not last long. They include diarrhea, vomiting, fever, runny nose, sore throat, wheezing or coughing, ear infection and hives. Serious side effects are rare.

Children receiving this vaccine are not more likely to get intussusception, a rare type of bowel obstruction that was found with an earlier rotavirus vaccine called Rotashield®. The vaccine contains no preservatives or thimerosal.

Is the rotavirus vaccine effective?

Yes. In studies on healthy infants given RotaTeq® vaccine, 74% of all rotavirus infections were prevented and 98% of severe infections were prevented. The vaccine reduced the need for hospitalizations due to rotavirus by 96%. RotaTeq® is effective for breastfed infants.

Who should not get the rotavirus vaccine?

An infant should not get the RotaTeq® vaccine if the child has had a serious reaction to a vaccine component or a previous dose. Your doctor may discuss the potential risks and benefits to give RotaTeq® if your child has:

- A weakened immune system from HIV infection, cancer, blood disorder, or from medications such as steroids that reduce the immune response
- Diarrhea or vomiting
- A fever or infection worse than a cold
- A gastrointestinal/digestive tract illness or a history of intussusception
- Received blood products, including immunoglobulin within 42 days

Do I have to pay for the RotaTeq® vaccine?

Yes. The price for all three doses is between \$200-250. You can buy it from a pharmacist, who will tell you how to keep the vaccine at the right temperature as you bring it to your doctor. Some health insurance plans will cover the cost; check with your provider.

Where can I get the rotavirus vaccine and what other issues should I consider?

A doctor or other health care provider can give this vaccine. Parents should remember to:

- Tell your health care provider about any side effects your infant has to this or any vaccine.
- Update your child's yellow immunization card every time a vaccine is given.
- Please provide the information on the vaccines given to your child to the Huron County Health Unit.

Whom should I talk to if I have any more questions about the rotavirus vaccine?

Talk to your family health care provider or the Huron County Health Unit (519-482-3416) for more information.

Your Record of Protection

After you or your child receives any immunization, make sure the doctor updates the yellow personal Immunization Record card. Keep it in a safe place!

Revised with permission from Toronto Public Health.