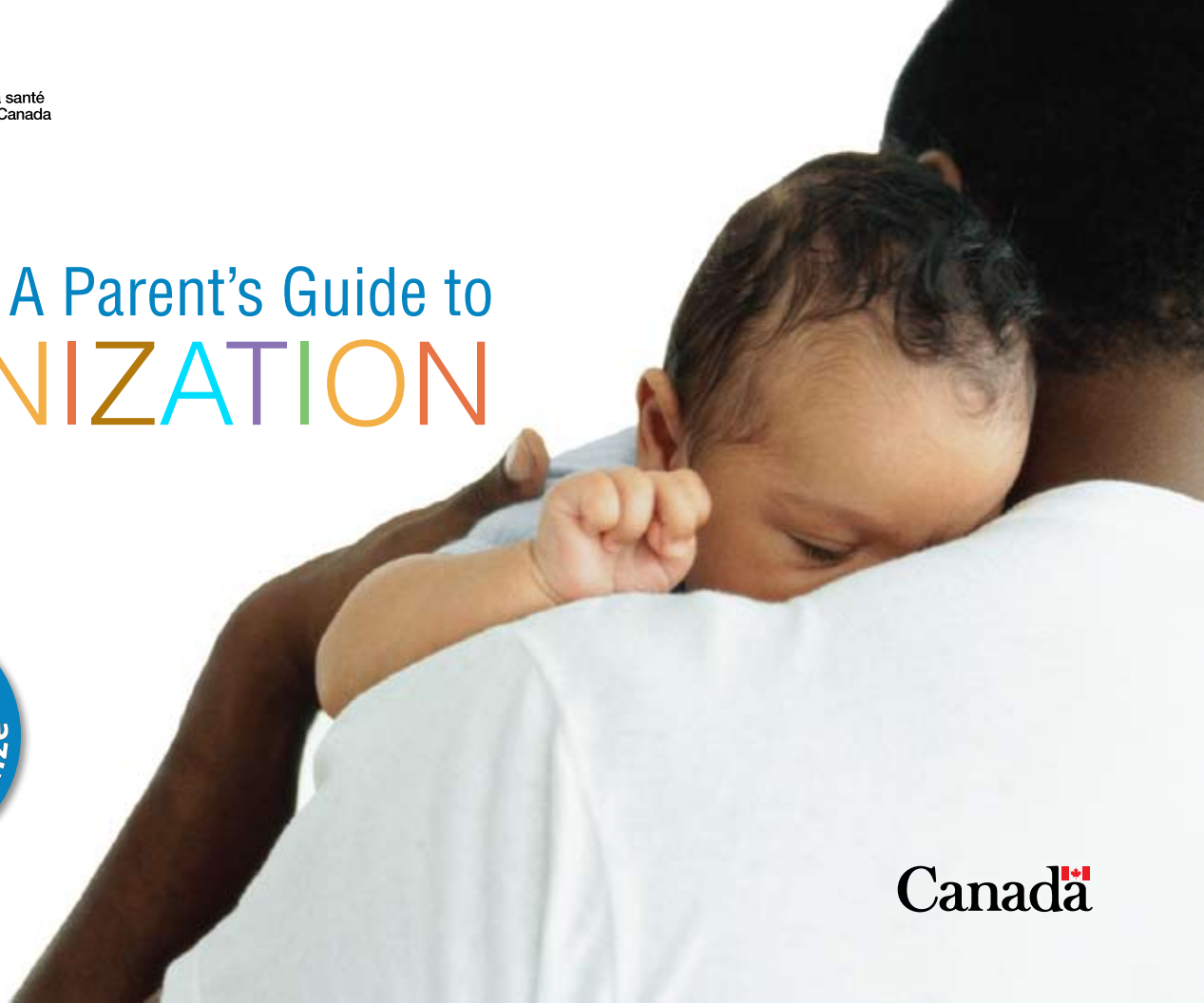




Public Health  
Agency of Canada

Agence de la santé  
publique du Canada

# A Parent's Guide to IMMUNIZATION



Canada 

“ To promote and protect the health of Canadians through leadership, partnership, innovation and action in public health.”

— Public Health Agency of Canada

A Parent's Guide to Immunization  
is available on the Internet at the following address:  
[www.publichealth.gc.ca/immunization](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca/immunization)

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A Parent's Guide to  
IMMUNIZATION



# 1

## Immunization — the safest way to protect your baby's health

Your baby deserves the best health and that includes protection from 13 vaccine-preventable diseases. You help protect your child not just the first time, but every time you keep your child's immunizations up-to-date.

Immunization has saved the lives of more babies and children than any other medical intervention in the last 50 years.

It's safe, it's simple — and it works!

### *IMMUNIZATION? SHOTS? VACCINES? NEEDLES?*

Many terms mean the same thing.

You may have heard people talk about 'getting shots' for their baby, 'having a vaccine' or 'immunization'.

These words all mean the same thing.

It doesn't matter what term you use, the most important thing is that your child does get this protection.

## How does immunization help my baby?

Your baby's immune system is the part of his body that protects him from germs. It's a special network that's always working to fight off diseases.

Every day, your baby is exposed to thousands of germs: at home, at daycare and at the grocery store. Even a sweet kiss from a brother or sister can be full of germs. Luckily, most of these germs can be easily handled by your baby's immune system and are harmless. Sometimes, though, your baby will meet up with a germ that can make him very sick.

Just as growing babies have to learn how to eat by themselves, their immune systems have to learn how to recognize and fight diseases. And just as your baby needs you to feed him, his immune system needs you to help him fight off serious diseases.

That's where your role in immunization comes in.

When you get your baby immunized, you help give him that extra *immunity* and *protection* to fight off vaccine-preventable diseases and stay healthy.



### DID YOU KNOW?

The word 'immunization' comes from the word 'immune' — which means protection from disease.

# 2

## Protect your baby from 13 serious diseases



When you immunize your baby, you're protecting her from 13 vaccine-preventable diseases. These diseases can be so serious that some children have died from them.

Nearly all of them are spread very easily from person to person, mostly through coughing and sneezing. Getting your baby her immunizations on time gives her the protection she needs to stay healthy.

### What diseases do immunizations prevent?

Your baby's immunizations prevent her from getting these 13 vaccine-preventable diseases. Most of these are now rare in Canada because of immunization—and that's a good thing.

1. **Diphtheria** can cause serious breathing problems for your child. Diphtheria can damage your child's heart and nervous system and cause paralysis.
2. **Tetanus** is a disease that most people think of if they step on a rusty nail. Tetanus is also found in dirt, manure and human stool. If tetanus gets into your baby's open cut, it can cause muscle spasms, convulsions and death.
3. **Pertussis (Whooping Cough)** can turn into severe coughing ("whooping" sound), choking and vomiting. It can last for weeks or months, and may even cause death. It is most dangerous when your baby is under six months old.
4. **Polio** attacks your child's nervous system and can paralyze muscles or even cause death.
5. **Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib)** can cause meningitis—an infection of the lining around your child's spinal cord and brain. It can also cause pneumonia, swelling in the back of the throat, deafness and death.
6. **Measles** can cause a rash, high fever, cough, runny nose and watery eyes that could last from 1–2 weeks. Measles can also cause pneumonia, convulsions, deafness, brain damage and death.

7. **Mumps** can cause a fever, headache, and swollen, painful cheeks and neck. It could make your child deaf and cause meningitis. In rare cases, mumps can affect future ability to have children.
8. **Rubella (German Measles)** causes a fever and a rash, which usually lasts for less than a week. It is very serious for *unborn* babies. If a pregnant woman who has no protection against rubella comes in contact with this disease early in her pregnancy, she could have a miscarriage. After exposure to rubella, the baby could be born deaf, blind, or with heart or brain damage. ***Before you become pregnant, ask your doctor if you need a rubella shot.***
9. **Varicella (Chickenpox)** causes a low fever and an itchy rash of blisters that form scabs. In some children, chickenpox causes severe skin infections (like flesh-eating disease), scars, pneumonia, brain damage or death.
10. **Hepatitis B** affects the liver and can sometimes cause liver cancer or other serious liver problems for your child.
11. **Pneumococcal disease** can cause pneumococcal meningitis, pneumonia, ear and blood infections. It could make your child deaf or cause brain damage.
12. **Meningococcal disease** can cause meningitis—an infection of the lining around your child's spinal cord and brain—or a blood infection. Children can die from meningitis.

13. **Influenza (The flu)** is a common respiratory infection that begins in your child's nose and throat. Influenza can be serious—especially for infants and young children. If your child has influenza complications, she may have difficulty breathing or might develop pneumonia.

### **If people hardly ever get these diseases, why does my baby need to be immunized?**

50 years ago, lots of children suffered from these serious diseases—and many died. Today, we are lucky. Because most children are immunized, many of these diseases have almost disappeared—but not completely.

If children stop being immunized, these diseases will become more common again. This has happened in other countries. When you immunize your child, you help to keep these diseases under control—for good.



#### **DID YOU KNOW?**

By not immunizing your baby, you make her 100% vulnerable to serious vaccine-preventable diseases.

# 3

## Vaccines are safe

Vaccines are safe, with huge benefits to your baby's health—all through his life.

### What is a vaccine?

A vaccine is the medicine in the needle when your baby is immunized. It is made of killed or weakened germs that help your baby's immune system learn how to protect itself. A vaccine protects your baby from getting very sick from the *real* disease.

### How does it work to protect my child?

The killed or weakened germs in the vaccine trigger your baby's immune system to produce two important tools to fight off that disease in the future: special cells called *antibodies* and a useful *immune memory* of the disease.

Both tools help your child's body to be ready to recognize the germs and fight off vaccine-preventable diseases when they are exposed to them.

Most children are fully protected by immunization. It means that they will never get the disease. Some children get partial protection from immunization. This means that they may develop mild symptoms if they are exposed to the disease, but without the serious complications.

### How can I be sure that vaccines are safe?

Vaccines are constantly monitored and tested around the world and in Canada before they are approved for use. Canada has several systems in place to keep a watchful eye on any reports of unusual side effects following immunizations.

Severe reactions from vaccines are extremely rare and are reported immediately to the Public Health Agency of Canada so that any problems can be dealt with quickly. The result is that our current vaccines are effective and safe. Vaccines are much safer than the 13 vaccine-preventable diseases they prevent.



## Can the vaccine make my baby sick?

No. Vaccines actually make your baby's immune system *stronger* by teaching it how to recognize and fight off infection. Your baby's natural immune system has no problem tackling and destroying the weak or dead germs in the vaccine. He may have a low fever and sleep more than usual or be cranky or fussy. These normal reactions usually last for a couple of days at the most following immunization.

Some people worry that vaccines can cause other health problems, such as autism, a lifelong developmental disorder. Medical researchers and scientists around the world have studied information collected over many years to see whether there is a link between vaccines and autism. **Researchers have not found any evidence of a link between vaccines and autism or any other illnesses.**



### DID YOU KNOW?

Vaccines are among the safest tools of modern medicine. In Canada, serious side effects occur very rarely—less than once in every one million doses of vaccine. If they do happen—they can be treated quickly and effectively.

The dangers of vaccine-preventable diseases are much greater than the risks of a serious reaction to a vaccine.

# 4

## Your baby needs to be immunized on time

The timing of your baby's immunizations is very important because vaccines work best when they're given at the right time. Your baby needs her immunizations when she is very young so that she can be protected from vaccine-preventable diseases when she is most vulnerable.

### What is the right time for my baby's immunization?

Your doctor or nurse will give you a copy of an *immunization schedule* that will tell you the *right age* and *right immunization* for your baby. Another way to find your baby's immunization schedule is to check [www.publichealth.gc.ca/immunization](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca/immunization).

To be fully protected, your baby will be immunized starting at the age of 2 months, then at 4 months, 6 months, between 12 months and 18 months—and also between the ages of 4 to 6 years. Additional immunizations are provided to school-aged children between grades 4 and 8. This schedule may vary based on where you live.

Some vaccines need to be given more than once to build your baby's immune system. With a few vaccines, your child will need a *booster immunization* when she is older, to keep her immunity strong.

### Isn't my baby too young?

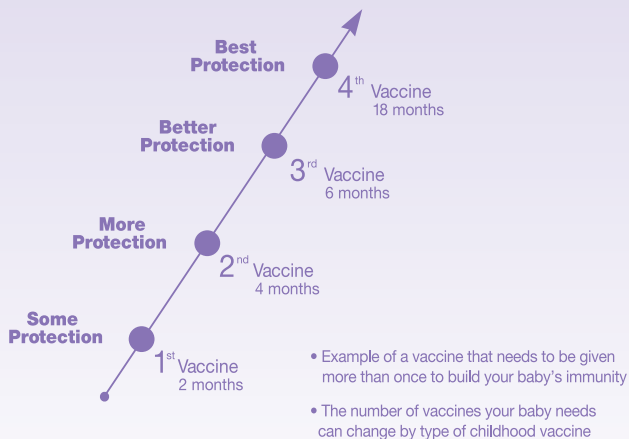
No. During her first 2 years of life, your baby is most at risk of getting one of the 13 vaccine-preventable diseases. This means that if she catches a disease like pertussis (whooping cough) or meningitis, she can get very sick—or even die. That's why immunization starts at the age of 2 months—to give her the most protection as early in life as possible.



## How many vaccines can my baby safely have at one time?

Your doctor or nurse will let you know which vaccines your baby needs at each visit to keep on schedule. Research shows that your baby's immune system can easily handle more than one vaccine safely and effectively.

### Here's How Your Baby Gets The Best Protection



### DID YOU KNOW?

When you make sure your baby gets all her immunizations on time, her immune system learns from the vaccines how to recognize and fight against disease to protect her — both now and in the future.

## What if we get behind schedule?

If you've missed one or more of your child's vaccines, book an appointment with your doctor's office or public health office (CLSC in Quebec) as soon as possible. They can help you figure out which vaccines your child has already had and which ones are needed.

# 5

## Your child depends on you for this protection



Getting your baby immunized on time is one of the most important jobs you have as a parent. If you continue to immunize your child as he grows, you're protecting him from serious diseases wherever he goes—when he's ten years old, twenty years old—and for the rest of his life.

### Where do I get my baby immunized?

When your baby is born, your doctor, nurse or midwife will tell you about the importance of having your baby immunized, beginning at the age of 2 months.

You can take your baby to your doctor, nurse, public health office (CLSC in Quebec) or other medical clinic for immunization.

### Not sure where to go?

Check your local phone book or on the Internet for your nearest public health office (CLSC in Quebec).

At the first visit, you will be given a card or booklet with your baby's schedule for the rest of his immunizations. At each visit, it's a good idea to make an appointment for his next immunization.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

When you immunize your baby, it's a good idea to check that your own immunizations are up-to-date.

### Is it free?

Yes. Routine childhood immunizations are free across Canada.

### Information for newcomers to Canada

Every part of Canada provides free routine immunizations. If you are a newcomer to Canada, you can ask a health care provider to check whether your child's immunizations are up-to-date. Based on the records you have, the doctor or nurse will recommend the immunizations your child needs.

It's important for you to check and update your own immunizations.



### DID YOU KNOW?

When travelling to another country, you and your family may be at risk for a number of diseases that can be prevented by immunization. It's important to consult a doctor, nurse or health care provider, or visit a travel health clinic at least six weeks before you travel. Additional immunizations may be recommended depending on your age, where you plan to travel and what you plan to do. Remember that preventing infection through immunization is a lifelong process. This also applies to family or friends visiting you from other countries—their immunizations also need to be up-to-date!

## How do I keep track?

Life with a new baby is *very busy*.

Here are 5 tips to make sure your baby gets the *right immunization* at the *right time*:

1. Every time your baby has an immunization, always book the appointment for the *next* immunization—even if it's months away.
2. As soon as you know the date of your baby's next immunization appointment, write it on your calendar.

3. Ask your doctor or nurse for a special *immunization record* or *card* to make it easy to keep track of all the immunizations your baby has had so far.
4. Bring your baby's immunization record with you *every time* so that your doctor or public health nurse can keep it up-to-date.
5. Keep your baby's immunization card in a safe place. You may need it later on to sign up for daycare or school, to travel to other countries or to take to the hospital in case of emergency.

**Use the checklist at the back of this Guide to help you keep track of your baby's immunizations!**

## Is my child required by law to be immunized?

In some parts of Canada, children are required to have all of their immunizations up-to-date before starting school. Laws vary in different provinces and territories.

To find out about immunization in your part of Canada, check your local phone book or on the Internet for your nearest public health office (CLSC in Quebec).

When you immunize your child, you protect him from vaccine-preventable diseases. You also protect *other* people from getting sick from these same diseases. The more people are immunized, the more we are able to wipe out these serious diseases.

# 6

## Your baby's first immunization — what to expect



Getting needles isn't fun. Your baby may have mild pain but it's very quick—just a few seconds and it's all done!

Here are some ways to make it easier on both of you:

### Before you go...

Remember to take your baby's immunization record with you to your doctor's office or the public health office (CLSC in Quebec).

When you get there, you may be asked some questions about your baby's general health and whether she has any allergies or health problems.

### What if my child has an allergy?

If you know that your baby is allergic to something be sure to tell your doctor or nurse before she gets any vaccines.



### DID YOU KNOW?

You'll be asked to stay in your doctor's office or public health office (CLSC in Quebec) for 15 minutes after your baby's immunization to check for allergic reactions.

With any medicine, there's always a slight chance of a severe allergic reaction.

Signs of a severe allergic reaction would include breathing problems (wheezing), swelling and blotchy skin on the body (hives) or around the mouth. If you see any of these symptoms or are concerned about your child's health, you should talk to the doctor or nurse immediately.

Fortunately, your doctor or nurse knows what to do and can respond immediately to counter the reaction.

### What if my baby has a cold?

If your child is sick or has a fever when it's time for her immunization, talk to your doctor or nurse. They can assess whether it's okay to give the immunization or if it's better to wait.

## During the immunization...

### What should I do to help my baby?

**Relax.** You may feel anxious that your baby is about to get one or more needles. That's normal. But the pain from a needle is mild and it's over very quickly. When you relax and try to stay positive, your baby will be happier too.

**Cuddle.** Studies have found that babies who are held while getting a needle tend to cry less. If you're breastfeeding, try feeding your baby just before or during the needle to comfort her.

**Distract.** Your gentle, soothing voice or touch can help comfort your baby.

## After it's over...

### How will my baby react?

Most babies are absolutely fine after immunization.

Your baby may have no reaction at all to the vaccine. Or she may be cranky or fussy or sleep more than usual. She may have a low fever, a sore red spot or a small swelling in the spot where she got the needle.

These reactions are all common and normal. Usually, they only last for a couple of days at most. You can give your baby medicine to help with the pain and lower her fever. Check with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist about what to give her.

## How do I know when to call my doctor or nurse?

Call your doctor or public health office (CLSC in Quebec) if your baby has any of the following symptoms after immunization:

- has a fever over 40°C or 104°F
- has a seizure or convulsions—this is often related to a very high fever
- is crying or fussy for more than 24 hours
- has swelling where she got the needle—and it's getting worse
- is unusually sleepy or unresponsive

You know your baby best. So if you notice anything that isn't normal for her after an immunization, it's always a good idea to check with your doctor or public health office (CLSC in Quebec).

**Congratulations for making sure that your baby has this important protection against serious preventable diseases.**

# 7

## Where can I find more information?

Like many parents, you may have questions about immunization. Talk to your doctor or nurse so that you have all the information you need about your baby's immunizations.

The provinces and the territories deliver immunization programs across Canada. To find more information about immunization, check your local phone book or on the Internet for your nearest public health office (CLSC in Quebec).



Here are some Web sites you can trust to find information on immunization:

- Public Health Agency of Canada  
[www.publichealth.gc.ca/immunization](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca/immunization)
- Canadian Paediatric Society  
[www.caringforkids.cps.ca](http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca)
- Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness and Promotion  
[www.immunize.ca](http://www.immunize.ca)



# 8

## Quick checklist for your baby's immunizations



To make sure your baby gets all immunizations on time:

- Make an appointment.** The first immunization starts at the age of 2 months.
- Bring your baby's immunization record.** You will need your baby's immunization record, which you'll get at the first appointment.
- Make the next appointment.** Set a date for your baby's next immunization *before* you leave your doctor's office or public health office (CLSC in Quebec).
- Mark the next date on your calendar.** Do this as soon as you get home so you won't forget.
- Keep your baby's immunization record safe.** Put it in a safe place so you can find it when you need it.

**Remember, immunization is the safest way to protect your baby's health.**







[www.publichealth.gc.ca/immunization](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca/immunization)