

# MOTHERS AND BABIES

## Mom's Vaccines Also Help Protect Newborns

(NAPSA)—Why does neonatal tetanus kill 215,000 infants a year worldwide, yet virtually none in the U.S.? The answer illustrates the importance of being a healthy, prepared mother.

Dr. Stanley Gall, a specialist in obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Louisville School of Medicine, points to two main reasons neonatal tetanus is so rare in the U.S. "First, the high standard of medical care in the U.S. decreases the chances that an infant's umbilical cord will become infected, which is the most common way an infant gets tetanus. Second, most young American women have had a complete series of tetanus vaccinations as children, which protects both them and their newborn babies."

### Passive Immunity

A key factor in the overall health of newborns in this country is passive immunity gained from the mother. During the last few months of pregnancy, mothers pass on antibodies to their unborn babies that will protect them from tetanus, diphtheria and other illnesses for which the mother has been vaccinated. This effect is temporary, lasting just weeks or months, but protects infants until they can get their immunizations against tetanus, diphtheria and other vaccine-preventable diseases.

Neonatal tetanus occurs in infants born without protective, passive immunity from the mother. In the two U.S. cases reported since 1989 neither of the infants' mothers had ever received a tetanus vaccination. Immunity against diphtheria also passes from a mother to her infant and can protect the baby for up to six months.

### Tetanus/Diphtheria

Like generalized adult tetanus, neonatal tetanus causes paralysis, usually starting at the top of the



**A key factor in the overall health of newborns in this country is passive immunity gained from the mother. During the last few months of pregnancy, mothers pass on antibodies to their unborn babies that will protect them from tetanus, diphtheria and other illnesses for which the mother has been vaccinated.**

body and working its way down. Between 70 and 100 percent of newborns with the disease will die, and it accounts for 14 percent of all neonatal deaths worldwide. The World Health Organization and UNICEF are working together to try to eliminate neonatal and maternal tetanus by the year 2005 through a program that vaccinates women of childbearing age in high-risk countries.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all women who are planning to have a baby be up to date on their immunizations, including the tetanus diphtheria booster, which can be given during pregnancy. Pregnant women who have never been immunized against tetanus and diphtheria should be given a complete three-dose series before the baby is born.

Diphtheria is caused by bacteria passed from one person to another that infects the throat and nasal passages; like tetanus, it can be fatal if left untreated. Though diphtheria cases are seldom seen in the U.S., the bacteria still circulate in some areas of North America and it is also common in a number of countries around the world.

### U.S. Vaccine Recommendations

Virtually all U.S. children are vaccinated against tetanus and diphtheria before they enter school with a series of four vaccinations (children usually receive DTaP, a combination vaccine protecting against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis or "whooping cough"). Since protective levels of antibodies for both tetanus and diphtheria fall over time, a combination vaccine known as "Td" is recommended by the CDC every 10 years. For adults who have never been adequately vaccinated, a complete three-dose series may need to be given, followed by booster immunizations every 10 years.

Rather than get the tetanus booster dose every 10 years as recommended, some adults end up getting it only when they receive medical treatment for a major wound. Dr. Gall questions the method. "Why wait and risk not being protected? The tetanus booster is safe, effective, and easy to get. One vaccine every 10 years can buy peace of mind." For women who are planning to have children, it's a recommendation that should not be ignored.

If you can't recall the last time you had a Td booster immunization, or have never been adequately vaccinated against tetanus and diphtheria, make an appointment with your doctor for an immunization. For more information about tetanus and diphtheria, check out the CDC's Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/>.