Pertussis Maternal Immunisation

Whooping cough, or **pertussis**, is a highly contagious respiratory illness caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. It can be particularly dangerous for infants, leading to severe coughing fits, difficulty breathing, and serious complications. One effective way to protect newborns from whooping cough is through **maternal immunisation**—vaccinating pregnant women to help shield their babies from this serious disease.

Why is Whooping Cough a Concern for Infants?

Infants are especially vulnerable to whooping cough because their immune systems are still developing. They are at high risk of severe complications, including:

- **Pneumonia** (lung infection)
- **Seizures**
- **Brain damage**
- **Death** in extreme cases

The first dose of the pertussis vaccine is typically given at 6 weeks of age, but it takes time for infants to build immunity. This means that they are particularly at risk during the first few months of life, especially if they are exposed to someone with the infection.

How Does Maternal Immunisation Work?

Maternal immunisation involves vaccinating pregnant women with the **Tdap vaccine**, which protects against tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. By receiving this vaccine during pregnancy, mothers can pass antibodies to their unborn babies. These antibodies provide temporary protection against whooping cough until the infant can receive their own vaccinations.

When Should Pregnant Women Get Vaccinated?

The ideal time for a pregnant woman to receive the Tdap vaccine is during the **third trimester**, specifically between **27 and 36 weeks of pregnancy**. Vaccination during this window maximizes the transfer of protective antibodies to the baby. The vaccine is safe for both the mother and the developing fetus, and it helps to ensure that the newborn is born with a level of protection against whooping cough.

Benefits of Maternal Immunisation

1. **Protects Newborns**: Vaccinating during pregnancy helps protect infants during their most vulnerable period when they are at the highest risk for severe disease.
2. **Reduces Outbreaks**: Increased maternal vaccination rates can contribute to higher community immunity levels, which helps protect those who cannot be vaccinated.
3. **Safe for Mothers**: The Tdap vaccine is safe for pregnant women and does not pose any risks to the baby.
4. **Encourages Family Immunity**: By ensuring that mothers are vaccinated, families can create a safer environment for their newborns.

Common Misconceptions

Some people may worry about receiving vaccines during pregnancy, but research has shown that maternal immunisation is safe and effective. It's important to discuss any concerns with a healthcare provider, who can provide accurate information and guidance.

References:

1. South African Department of Health