

History of rubella immunisation

Prior to immunisation the rubella virus circulated freely amongst the population, with the UK experiencing regular epidemics. It occurred commonly in children and more than 80% of adults showed some evidence of catching the disease at some point (Morgan Capner et al, 1988).

Before vaccination was introduced in the early 1970's it is estimated that 200 - 300 infants were born with Congenital Rubella Syndrome in each non-epidemic year in the UK; many more were born in epidemic years.

Sense was established in 1955 by two mum's whose children had been damaged by rubella. They wanted to support each other and warn others of the dangers of rubella.

An Australian, Dr Gregg, in 1941 first identified the link between rubella and congenital damage in children. Since then many worked on ways to protect pregnant women. The vaccine was developed during the 1960s and a rubella vaccine was licensed in the UK in 1970; it was offered to schoolgirls aged 11 - 14. This was extended in 1972 to women of childbearing age and women after pregnancy who had been screened for rubella susceptibility during pregnancy.

In 1971 the National Congenital Rubella Surveillance Programme was established to monitor how well vaccination was protecting pregnant women.

During the 1970s and 1980s cases of rubella in pregnancy continued to occur, albeit at a reduced rate. Often susceptible women acquired the rubella infection from their own or their friends' children.

In 1988 MMR was introduced for all children. The aim of this universal immunisation was to stop rubella circulating among children so they could not pass it on to pregnant women. This mass immunisation with MMR has been a success story. There are now only a handful of rubella births and terminations each year.

In 1994 there was a mass measles and rubella vaccination to catch those who had not been eligible for MMR (they were too old when it was introduced) and who had missed out on the single rubella jab.

In 1996 the school-girl programme of a single rubella vaccine was ended, and the second dose of MMR pre-school was introduced

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