Rotavirus vaccine included in the Childhood Immunisation Programme from autumn 2014

What is rotavirus?
About half of all cases of diarrhoea and vomiting among infants and young children are due to rotavirus. The infection often causes more severe symptoms than other gastrointestinal infections. Before the rotavirus vaccine was introduced in the immunisation programme, rotavirus was the cause of almost two-thirds of all hospital admissions of young children with vomiting and diarrhoea.

Since having the rotavirus infection only gives partial immunity from re-infection, most children will get it several times during childhood.

How rotavirus spreads
Rotavirus is very contagious. The usual route of infection is when a child puts their hand in their mouth after touching an object contaminated with rotavirus, such as a hand, a toy or a table. The virus is excreted in the faeces of the sick child before, during and after the illness. Good hand hygiene will help to limit the spread of the virus but will never stop it completely.

Vaccine protects the most vulnerable
Most children recover without any complications. Children under the age of two are most at risk of dehydration as a result of vomiting and diarrhoea. Some children will therefore need to be treated by a doctor or in hospital. If the treatment comes too late the illness can be fatal, but this is rare in our part of the world. Before the rotavirus vaccine was introduced, 700-1100 children were admitted annually to hospital with rotavirus. By vaccinating the youngest children against rotavirus, fewer will become seriously ill.
About the vaccine
The vaccine is given orally and has a sweet taste. It consists of a live, weakened rotavirus. The vaccine does not cause rotavirus infection in healthy children.

The vaccination provides protection for at least three to four years, enough to protect the youngest and most vulnerable children.

The vaccine is extremely effective. It protects almost 100% of children against serious rotavirus infection. In countries where the vaccine has been introduced, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of rotavirus cases. Vaccination of young children also leads to fewer cases amongst older children.

The rotavirus vaccine only provides protection from rotavirus and not from other viruses or bacteria that can cause vomiting and diarrhoea.

Side effects
The rotavirus vaccine has been tested in major studies and is used in over 50 countries. Since 2006, almost 300 million doses of the two vaccines approved by the pharmaceutical authorities have been distributed.

Like all other medicines, the rotavirus vaccine can cause side effects. The most common side effects for the vaccine used in the programme (Rotarix) are:

- Irritability and loose stools (less than one in ten vaccinated children)
- Stomach pain, trapped wind, skin rash (less than one in 100 vaccinated children)

Intestinal invagination is a rare condition amongst infants where part of the intestine folds into another section of the intestine. Every year in Norway, 35-40 children under one year old are admitted to hospital with invagination. Studies have shown that this figure may rise slightly following the introduction of the rotavirus vaccine (this is less than one additional case per 20,000 vaccinations), particularly when the vaccine is administered above a certain age. The first dose must therefore be given before your child is 12 weeks old, with the second dose being given before 16 weeks.

If your child develops symptoms that concern you during the first few days after vaccination, consult your health centre or doctor.

The most common side effects are mild and pass quickly.
When should the vaccination be given?
The rotavirus vaccine is given early in infancy in two doses. The first dose is given no earlier than six weeks of age and no later than 12 weeks of age. The second dose is given at around three months but no later than 16 weeks of age.

The child must be given 2 doses:
1. At 6 weeks
2. At 3 months

Before vaccination
Tell the health centre if your child has recently been given medicine, or has allergies or other health problems.

Vaccination should be delayed if your child has an acute infectious illness with a fever over 38ºC or an acute gastrointestinal infection with diarrhoea and/or vomiting.

Children who have suffered a severe reaction to the first dose of the vaccine should not be given the second dose.

Children with a serious illness should be assessed by a doctor before being given the vaccine.

After vaccination
Some vaccinated children can excrete the vaccine virus in their faeces. However, children who are in close contact with people with immune deficiency should still be vaccinated. The risk of infection by rotavirus naturally is greater than that of being infected by the vaccine virus. To prevent infection by the vaccine virus, good hygiene when changing nappies is particularly important.

Vaccine registration
Like all other vaccinations in the Childhood Immunisation Programme, rotavirus vaccinations must be registered in the Norwegian Immunisation Registry (SYSVAK). The child’s name, personal identity number, home address and vaccination details are entered in this register.

Parents of children under 16 years of age can obtain an overview of which vaccines their child has had through the Mine vaksiner (‘My vaccines’) service at www.helsenorge.no. Once they reach 16, the child must log in themselves. An electronic ID (e.g. Bank ID) is needed to log in.

You can print out a vaccination summary in Norwegian or English.
Useful to know:

- Globally, rotavirus is the major cause of severe diarrhoea in infants and small children. Every year, the illness leads to 24 million medical consultations, at least 2 million hospital admissions and more than 450,000 deaths in children under the age of 5.

- In Norway, most cases of rotavirus occur between February and June, peaking between March and May.

- There are two rotavirus vaccines. More than 60,000 infants took part in the trials of each of the two vaccines. This is the largest clinical trial of infant vaccines to have been carried out to date.

- Almost 300 million doses of rotavirus vaccine had been distributed worldwide by the end of 2013.

- The rotavirus vaccine is included in childhood immunisation programmes in around 50 countries, including the USA, Canada, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Finland and the UK. In Sweden, the vaccine is being introduced in Stockholm. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended that the rotavirus vaccine should be introduced into the childhood immunisation programme in every country.

- The rotavirus vaccine does not protect against other types of virus or bacteria that can give rise to vomiting and diarrhoea.