

Common Questions and Answers about Immunizations

As a parent, you make many decisions about your child's health. Vaccinating your child is one of the most important choices you will make. You may hear about vaccines from relatives, friends and the media, but your child's doctor is the best person to answer any questions you may have. He or she can speak to you specifically about your child. Here are some of the questions parents ask most often.

What do immunizations do?

Vaccines protect children from illnesses that can spread from person to person such as diphtheria, polio, measles, influenza and meningitis. Vaccines work by getting your child's body ready to fight illness. Each shot your child receives contains either a killed or weakened germ that can cause a certain disease. Your child's body then practices fighting that disease by making antibodies, special proteins that fight the germ. That way, if your child is ever exposed to the actual disease, his body already has what it needs and knows how to fight it. This is called immunity. The vaccines your child receives work best when they are given on schedule and at the right ages.

Can the shot give my child the disease it is supposed to prevent?

It is impossible to get the disease from any vaccine made with killed germs or viruses or just parts of the germs (DTaP, Hib, Pneumovax, Hepatitis A, Influenza). Only the immunizations made from weakened live viruses, like the chicken pox or measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine could possibly make a child contract a mild form of the disease, but this risk is very small. Since changing from the oral polio vaccine to the polio shot, there is no risk of polio disease being caused by the vaccine.

If the diseases these vaccines prevent are rare now, why does my child still need to get them?

The vaccines are still needed:

- To prevent diseases that are still common in this country, like chicken pox and whooping cough (pertussis).

- To prevent infections that could easily come back, like measles, mumps, rubella and Hib. If fewer children in schools or day care centers get their shots, outbreaks of these diseases are still likely to happen. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, thousands of children were hospitalized with measles and more than 120 died. Children who had not had their shots were much more likely to catch measles.
- To prevent infections that are common in other parts of the world. Because many people travel into and out of countries that still see these diseases, outbreaks can happen in this country. Your child could easily be exposed to someone from another country who has one of these diseases.

Are vaccines safe?

Since vaccines are given to people who are not sick, they must meet the highest standards of safety. Medical researchers and public health professionals are always studying the safest ways to prevent these diseases. Any vaccine can have side effects in some people. Most of these side effects are mild, such as fever and redness or swelling where the shot is given. In very rare cases, some immunizations can cause allergic reactions. The risk of severe side effects from an immunization are much lower than the risk of severe complications from the disease that it prevents, should the disease be contracted. If you are ever worried about how your child looks or acts after a vaccination, call your child's doctor or health clinic right away.

You can play a role by always keeping a record of the shots your child has received and by bringing it with you to each doctor visit, including visits to the emergency room. There will be times your child will need this record throughout his life for school, work, travel or when he may have an accident. The Georgia Registry of Immunization Transaction and Services (GRITS) program is now available. This Registry is designed to keep complete records of your child's immunization history and can be accessed at any doctor's office or emergency room where GRITS is being used. Ask your child's doctor if he is using the GRITS program.

Do vaccines weaken the immune system?

No, in fact, studies have shown that children who are vaccinated as babies have fewer infections of all kinds than those who do not get their shots. Immunization is one of the best ways to protect your child against contagious diseases (those that one person can catch from another). Vaccines stimulate the child's immune system to react as if there were a real infection. The immune system then fights off the "infection" and remembers the bacteria or virus so it can fight it off quickly if it enters the body at some future time.

Why does my child need to be immunized if he is healthy, active and eating well?

Vaccinations are given to help healthy children stay healthy. Vaccines protect the body before a child ever comes in contact with the germ, so giving it when the child is already sick with the disease is too late. The best time to immunize your child is when he is healthy.

Is it safe to give my child his shots when he has a cold and fever?

A child with a minor illness can still safely get his shots. Minor illnesses include:

- low grade fever
- ear infection
- cough
- runny nose
- mild diarrhea in an otherwise healthy child.

Your doctor will let you know if your child should not receive the vaccine

Does the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine cause autism or other diseases?

Many scientific studies have looked at this question, and they have definitely concluded that there is no cause-and-effect relationship between MMR vaccine and autism. In fact the most recent study suggested that, if anything, MMR mildly protected against the development of autism. The only reason such a link was ever proposed was that the first signs of autism usually appear about the same age that children routinely receive their first MMR vaccine. This fact has been shown to be purely coincidental. In the same way, studies have also shown that vaccinations do not cause allergic diseases such as asthma or chronic diseases such as type 1 diabetes, multiple sclerosis or arthritis.

Are the preservatives found in vaccines safe?

Thimerosal is a preservative, containing a small amount of inactive mercury, which has been used in some vaccines to protect them from contamination. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) found that no harm could be caused by the small amounts of Thimerosal in vaccines. However, in 1999, the United States Public Health Service, the American Academy of Pediatrics and vaccine manufacturers agreed that Thimerosal should be reduced or eliminated in vaccines. Today, Thimerosal has been removed from all routinely recommended vaccines. ■

Get your questions answered from these reliable resources

Brochure - "What If You Don't Immunize Your Child"
<http://www.immunize.org/catg.d/p4017.pdf>

Childhood Immunization Support Program
<http://www.cispimmunize.org>

Diabetes and Vaccines
<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/vacsafe/concerns/diabetes/default.htm>
<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/vacsafe/concerns/diabetes/q&a.htm>

Handout - "The Facts About Childhood Vaccines"
http://www.chop.edu/vaccine/images/vec_facts.pdf

Immunize Georgia's Little Guys
www.choa.org/immunization

Immunization Records
<http://www.cdc.gov/NIP/recs/immuniz-records.htm>
<http://www.cdc.gov/NIP/kidstuff>

Institute of Medicine Immunization Safety Review Committee
www.iom.edu/immsafety

National Center for Infectious Diseases, Flu Site:
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/flu/fluvirus.htm>

National Network for Immunization Information
<http://www.immunizationinfo.org/parents/index.cfm>

Parents of Kids with Infectious Diseases
<http://www.pkids.org/immunizations.htm>

Thimerosal and Vaccines
<http://www.pkids.org/thimer2003.htm>
<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/vacsafe/vsd/VSDstudyQAs.htm>
<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/vacsafe/concerns/thimerosal/faqs-thimerosal.htm#2>

Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
<http://www.chop.edu/consumer/jsp/division/generic.jsp?id=75697>

Vaccine Information for the public and health professionals
<http://www.vaccineinformation.org/> ■

